



UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

**Stakeholder engagement practices in environmental management projects at eThekwin
Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs**

By

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DECLARATION

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Abstract

Achieving quality public service delivery in communities has been characterised by increasing conflicts between the responsible local government departments and the recipient communities. To understand the root of these increasing conflicts, the stakeholder management theory examined how the stakeholders have been integrated and engaged in the environmental management projects directed by the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs. To investigate the practices undertaken in stakeholder engagement at the Department, this study utilised a case study to evaluate the department's current involvement of stakeholders and management practices to record existing effectiveness, inefficiencies, and limitations to create a combined, proactive strategy for stakeholder engagement and management to aid in developing ways to mitigate the Department's current challenges. A purposive sampling technique was used to identify fourteen participants among various external stakeholders who responded to the interview questions to gain deeper insights into their perspectives on their engagement in seven selected environmental projects currently underway in the eThekweni Municipal area. Using thematic analysis, the study results indicated that there were power disparities and conflicts of interest among stakeholders and a lack of resources and capacity for efficient stakeholder engagement and management. It was also revealed that stakeholders felt marginalised and excluded in the environmental management project decision-making process. The conclusions drawn from the study have shown the shortcomings and the need for improvement of the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs' current stakeholder engagement practices. Ultimately, developing relationships with stakeholders and earning their trust and credibility are critical to successful stakeholder engagement and management. The study recommends implementing a more inclusive and participatory stakeholder engagement approach that enables all stakeholders involved in environmental management projects to leverage resources, proficiency, and knowledge to achieve environmental project objectives.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement, Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, Environmental Management Projects, Stakeholder Management, Environmental Sustainability

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

DSW - Durban Solid Waste

EDEDTEA - eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism, and Environmental Affairs

IDP - Integrated Development Plan

NPO - Non-Profit Organization

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

OSS - Operation Sukuma Sakhe

SMME - Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprises

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The study sought to investigate the nature and efficiency of practices aimed at the engagement of stakeholders in environmental management work at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism, and Environmental Affairs (hereafter referred to as the Department). This chapter focuses on the research background, problem statement, objectives, and central questions that were answered in the study. In the subsequent sections, the literature is briefly discussed, highlighting significant aspects of relevance to the present inquiry's objectives, and the research methodology is outlined together with its theoretical premises.

1.1. Background of the study

Stakeholder management is a process of developing, maintaining, and improving relationships between an organisation and those who have a stake in or are interested in the organisation's activities (Bourne & Walker, 2015). The Department and the management of interest holders presented a problem primarily stemming from the complex mix of stakeholders, the networks and web of interactions, and the numerous interested parties and potentially affected groups in various projects in water, sanitation, and public infrastructure provision and maintenance (eThekweni, 2019). While integrated development projects have been comprehensive, they have yet to be platformed by extensive stakeholder engagement and management systems. Therefore, problems have tended to become ubiquitous during project execution (Lindskog, 2012). Although stakeholder management systems are operational, they still need to improve in proactive and systematic responses, failing to deliver expected outcomes in terms of service quality.

The mounting problems in stakeholder management at the Department have collided with the expected geographic expansion of service coverage. This was observed in the eThekweni Municipality reports of 2018 and 2024, where the geographic area experienced a significant expansion, with a continued rise in population and diversity of these demographic characteristics. Of this area, at least 35 per cent constitutes urban housing, with 80 per cent of the individuals and households making up the population and the remainder housed in peri-urban or rural settings. Interestingly, the stark difference in socioeconomic endowments presents diverse stakeholders whose interests collide. Yet, there have been two comprehensively accommodating stakeholder management systems to meet the expanded

service coverage (eThekweni Municipality, 2015). The rapid urbanisation, intensified by increased rural-urban migration since at least 60 per cent of eThekweni economic activity is urban-based, has seen a service delivery backlog with diverse responses across different stakeholder groups with divergent demands and expected outcomes, revealing the existing gaps in present stakeholder management practices at the Department.

In response to public infrastructure demand since 2015, the Department has committed substantial capital investment in integrated development initiatives, with more public infrastructure projects earmarked for addressing service backlogs. However, there needs to be clear and systematic planning concerning stakeholder engagement, as the various projects will affect the outcomes for diverse individuals and groups. This study focused on the practices adopted and executed by the Department in various environmental projects. These were to be potentially effective in achieving a low-carbon economy, contributing to social inclusion, job creation, and disintegrating economic development. However, the success of the projects could be significantly impeded if the existing systemic failures in stakeholder management and engagement still need to be addressed. Focusing on several projects being undertaken, this study concentrated on internal stakeholders in the Department to appraise the existing or evolving internal perspective on stakeholder engagement and management practices at the Department to develop an improved framework for better working relations with stakeholders.

1.2. Problem Statement

The Department is grappling with several challenges in executing environmental management programmes, notably conflicts among stakeholders with divergent views on management and expected outcomes (eThekweni, 2019). These issues have manifested through increased complaints via public channels such as call centres and protests, indicating rising dissatisfaction with service delivery and stakeholder participation in community-affecting projects (eThekweni Municipality, 2018). Such unrest has led to work stoppages, vandalism, financial losses, and negative publicity due to unmet stakeholder expectations during project execution, despite reported consultations. The failure to complete projects on time, compounded by irregular and unplanned capital expenditures, underscores the growing problem of ineffective stakeholder engagement (eThekweni Municipality, 2018).

This situation is rooted in a disconnect between traditional stakeholder engagement methods and the evolving, digitally informed expectations of communities. While various engagement platforms, workshops, awareness campaigns, and information systems exist, they have become less effective as access to information and public scrutiny has increased. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed weaknesses in private-public engagement systems, highlighting the ineffectiveness of generalised approaches (Derry, 2015). Despite existing research on stakeholder systems in industrial contexts (Sternberg, 2017), there is limited empirical work on public-sector models in eThekweni. Without addressing these issues, the Department risks continued protests, reputational damage, economic decline in urban areas, and ongoing financial inefficiencies, weakening its capacity for future environmental leadership and project sustainability (eThekweni, 2019; eThekweni Municipality, 2018).

1.3. Research Aims

This study assessed the existing stakeholder engagement and practices of management at the Department to document existing efficiencies, inefficiencies, and limitations to develop an integrated, proactive approach to stakeholder engagement and management to assist in developing mitigation methods for the Department's present challenges. This was instrumental in filling the existing gap between the technical, organisational, and socioeconomic processes in the design and execution of environmental management programmes.

1.4. Research Objectives

- To investigate the current practices used for stakeholder identification in projects within the Department.
- To assess the effectiveness and limitations of existing practices in stakeholder analysis, information systems, and engagement processes.
- To examine the efficacy of current communication methods for stakeholder engagement in the Department.
- To provide alternative strategies to mitigate conflicts and enhance relations between the Department and its stakeholders.

1.5. Research questions

- What stakeholder identification practices are currently implemented by the Department, and how do they influence project outcomes?

- How is stakeholder analysis conducted within the Department, and to what extent are existing systems and practices influential in shaping project outcomes?
- Which communication systems and feedback mechanisms are utilised in interactions between the Department and its stakeholders, and how effective are these processes?
- How do stakeholder engagement and management practices in the Department influence environmental project planning, implementation, and associated challenges?

1.6. The Significance of the Study

The primary importance of the study lay in its empirical addition to the existing body of literature on stakeholder engagement and management in the public sector. It would also bring some issues to the appropriate discursive platforms to encourage deliberative change in the Department and promote improvements in public engagement in community project planning and implementation. The study would also generate new avenues for empirical research, creating the platform for research strands for other researchers to understand public stakeholder challenges in South Africa.

The study employed multiple case studies, aiming to illustrate the relationships between complex interactions and conflicting values in local public governance mechanisms. Finally, the study could contribute to stakeholder governance by developing a stakeholder engagement and management model for public projects using the Department case. Such a model could be applied in different environments and circles, such as policymaking, practitioners' fields, business applications, academics, and stakeholder analysis, thus improving public governance systems.

1.7. Justification for the Study

The study's relevance stems from an existing gap in stakeholder engagement and management systems in public governance and the resulting project execution. There is a need to understand why specific individuals, groups, communities, and regions respond the way they do to projects purported to be directed towards improving human and social welfare. The various approaches and tools for stakeholder management that the Department utilises in consultative platforms, public campaigns, feedback, and other communicative systems must be investigated to ascertain the causes of emergent conflicting views between the Department and various stakeholders. Furthermore, understanding the source of these contradictory issues would help define the existing problems, their nature, and the possible solutions. Given the sparse

literature, such matters could only be understood with this study or similar studies to fill the gap.

1.8. Methodology

1.8.1. Research Philosophy and Paradigm

The study is grounded in interpretivism, which prioritizes subjective meaning and context over quantifiable metrics, allowing for a deeper understanding of stakeholder experiences and environmental project execution (Pulla & Carter, 2018; Darby et al., 2019; Mitchell et al., 2021). Interpretivism supports the exploration of how diverse stakeholders view legitimacy, power, and interests (Iandolo et al., 2024). Aligned with this, the study also adopts a constructivist paradigm, which holds that knowledge and reality are co-constructed through experience and interaction (Eaton et al., 2021; Reed et al., 2018). This paradigm is particularly suited to examining conflicting stakeholder perspectives and the social dynamics of engagement (Colvin et al., 2020; Kujala et al., 2022).

1.8.2. Research Design

A qualitative multiple case study design was used to gain in-depth insights into stakeholder experiences across seven environmental projects in eThekweni (Espín et al., 2019). This approach facilitates pattern replication and theoretical generalisation through interviews and document analysis (Vohra, 2014).

1.8.3. Population and Sampling

The target population included seven project-based stakeholder groups, each with at least 25 members. Purposive sampling was applied to select 14 participants, two from each group, based on their direct involvement and knowledge of the projects (Ames et al., 2019; Jayiya et al., 2022). Gender representation was also considered to ensure balanced perspectives.

1.8.4. Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, allowing for open-ended, in-depth exploration of stakeholder roles, engagement quality, and communication systems (Kakilla, 2021; Bell-Brown et al., 2022). Supplementary field notes captured reflections and contextual observations (Pacheco-Vega, 2019; Goodman et al., 2020). Document analysis of departmental

reports and policies provided institutional perspectives and supported triangulation (Williamson et al., 2019).

1.8.5. Data Analysis

Data from interviews was transcribed, translated (where applicable), and analysed using NVivo 12 software. A constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and thematic coding helped generate patterns from responses (Maher et al., 2018). Codes were linked to research questions and refined iteratively to derive themes relevant to stakeholder identification, analysis, communication, and feedback (Ominde et al., 2021).

1.8.6. Ensuring Quality of Findings

Trustworthiness was achieved through multiple strategies:

- **Credibility** through prolonged engagement and member-checking (Amin et al., 2020; Byram, 2022). Participants will be engaged in semi-structured interviews and later invited to validate their responses, ensuring the findings accurately reflect their lived experiences and stakeholder dynamics.
- **Dependability** through process documentation and audit trails (Kale, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). A detailed research log and audit trail will capture all methodological decisions, enabling replication and demonstrating consistency under similar conditions.
- **Transferability** by providing rich contextual descriptions (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). Relevant descriptions of participant roles, project settings, and municipal operations will enable readers to assess the relevance of findings to similar environments.
- **Confirmability** by maintaining reflexive journals and an independent audit (Kyngäs et al., 2019; Harrison, 2019). Reflexive journaling and third-party review ensured objectivity, reducing researcher bias and reinforcing that insights were grounded in participant narratives.

1.8.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from UKZN's HHSSREC. Gatekeeper permissions were secured, and participant confidentiality was protected via pseudonyms and secured data

storage. Consent and transparency in interviews were strictly upheld to ensure participant safety and data integrity (Evans & Lewis, 2018).

1.8.8. Study Limitations

Findings were limited to seven stakeholder groups and specific roles within them, potentially restricting generalizability. The focus on detailed, role-specific perspectives meant some broader group dynamics may have been underrepresented.

1.9. Chapter outline

The dissertation is divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: This chapter introduces the research topic, providing a comprehensive background that explores stakeholder engagement issues and particular cases relevant to the Department. It establishes in detail the study's aims, objectives, and research questions and presents the significance and justification for studying public-sector stakeholder practices in the field of environmental management.

Chapter 2: This chapter reviews existing literature to contextualise stakeholder engagement within public-sector projects, focusing on theories and frameworks that inform effective stakeholder identification, communication, and management. The review identifies gaps in current research, particularly in South Africa, establishing the theoretical foundation for analysing stakeholder practices in the Department's environmental initiatives.

Chapter 3: This chapter details the study's methodological framework, outlining the interpretivist and constructivist paradigms that shape its qualitative approach. It discusses research design, sampling strategy, and data collection methods, emphasising the choice of in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to capture the subjective experiences of stakeholders involved in departmental projects.

Chapter 4: This chapter presents the data analysis, structured around key themes derived from participant responses. It reveals insights into stakeholder identification, communication, and engagement practices, illustrating the strengths and challenges within the Department's current approaches. The findings inform recommendations for a more robust stakeholder management model.

Chapter 5: This concluding chapter synthesises the study's findings, emphasising the importance of structured stakeholder engagement practices. It provides actionable recommendations, such as establishing a stakeholder engagement unit and improving communication channels. The chapter also suggests areas for future research, highlighting the potential impact of enhanced stakeholder frameworks on sustainable environmental governance.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction

This chapter discusses briefly the literature on the interactions between public institutions and diverse stakeholders. It focuses on four specific aspects of this interaction: stakeholder identification, stakeholder communication, stakeholder analysis, and stakeholder engagement. The motivation is that a clear understanding of these interrelated concepts and processes would enable the research to map the problems undergirding the present inquiry in the Department.

2.2. Stakeholder identification

Effective stakeholder identification is one of the priorities in dealing with the environmental project needs under the management of the Department. Recent literature calls for adaptive frameworks capable of capturing the evolving dynamics of stakeholders in public sector projects. For instance, Butt et al. (2021) reason that stakeholder mapping models must allow for fluid, non-static interests, something familiar in environmental projects since stakeholder roles may change drastically over time. According to Franklin (2020), early identification is likely to reduce the potential conflict resulting from unmet expectations by aligning stakeholder interests with project goals. Such a proactive approach will support achieving the study's objectives since all relevant stakeholders are engaged immediately, disruptions are minimised, and long-term project success is ensured. Furthermore, recent scholarship points to novel approaches, such as digital stakeholder engagement tools, to enhance the accuracy of outreach and identification in urban and peri-urban settings (Dalton, 2019). These developments demonstrate that a dynamic and flexible approach toward stakeholder identification can underpin more effective engagement by accurately capturing diverse and, at times, competing interests of different stakeholder groups. Revised literature supports enhancing stakeholder identification practices and their impact on project outcomes.

2.2.1. Why identification matters

Accurate and timely stakeholder identification continues to be a critical requirement for environmental project success. The most recent studies by Park and Lee (2015) find that early stakeholder recognition minimises the possibility of project delays by integrating diverse interests into project planning. This agrees with the aim of the research to review existing practices and their influence on organisational outcomes critically. Effective identification ensures the consideration of stakeholders' influence, concerns, and expectations, which helps

to prevent conflicts that might arise during the project implementation. In recent years, Dalton (2019) noted that stakeholder interests in public environmental projects often diverge so much that inclusive identification practices are necessary to accommodate perspectives across a broad spectrum. This research reveals that emerging identification technologies, such as AI-driven surveys and social media sentiment analysis, enable broader comprehension of stakeholders' needs, particularly for those traditionally underserved or marginalised groups (Franklin, 2020). In this line of reasoning, the present research is situated at the assessment and improvement of existing processes of identification and engagement, where stakeholder participation becomes inclusive and representative in the beginning and leads toward better alignment with organisational strategies.

2.3. Multiple stakeholders' challenges

Public projects generally face issues with diverging interests among the stakeholders, and such conflicts tend to arise with the life cycle of a project. Achterkamp and Vos (2022) categorise effective stakeholder categorisation and prioritisation as vital skills for navigating the competing demands of an environmental project. This is of value for understanding challenges because the study aimed to analyse current practices of stakeholder analysis. Recent studies advocate for a phased engagement strategy, wherein stakeholders are grouped and engaged based on project impact and relevance, thereby preventing mid-project conflicts (Franklin, 2020). Moreover, changes in stakeholder interest as projects progress are also underlined by Dalton (2019) in relevance to adaptive engagement strategies. In this respect, public sector projects, such as environmental management, need feedback mechanisms to help identify emerging stakeholder issues early to prevent project derailments (Talley et al., 2016). With this new understanding, the purpose of the study has been met, which is to develop a proactive stakeholder engagement approach that will mitigate current challenges and facilitate smoother project implementation.

2.4. Public policy perspective

In the analysis of public project characteristics, recent scholarship underlines the critical importance of a broadened, inclusive stakeholder identification approach that involves not only policymakers and primary decision-makers but also considers beneficiaries, financiers, and those affected in the long run by policy decisions (Achterkamp & Vos, 2022). There is a slow realisation of the recognition of stakeholders beyond the narrow view, which includes, on a large scale, sectors such as environmental management, where project results impact future

generations and multiple socio-economic groups. As Franklin (2020) puts it, only a broad spectrum of stakeholder interests can strengthen decision-making by embedding community and public concerns within the strategic framework for better project acceptance and less opposition.

This inclusive approach comes, however, with its own set of challenges. Among the essential constraints is that many public institutions have limited resources, time, and organisational bandwidth, which makes it very difficult to engage all the stakeholders meaningfully throughout the project life cycle. Hence, many public sector organisations tend to prioritise stakeholders that either hold direct influence at the current time or whose demands fully align with the set objectives for the project (Dalton, 2019a). In so doing, there is the risk of sidelining important but less vocal groups, such as local communities or future generations, whose interests may also be critically affected by project decisions but may not have an immediate influence on the negotiation process. Practically, such exclusion may breed dissatisfaction and conflicts, which, if left unattended, may further escalate and break the project schedules (Talley et al., 2016).

The balancing act between inclusivity and feasibility has compelled many organisations to adopt stakeholder identification typologies that allow them to embrace a more structured and strategic approach. In the words of Achterkamp and Vos (2017), typologies enable decision-makers to classify stakeholders according to their availability of resources, level of influence, urgency of interest, and commitment to the project. In all, classifying stakeholders into high priority could enable an organisation to address the most pressing interests of stakeholders while remaining inclusive to some extent. Structured approaches have proven helpful in managing large-scale public projects where there is always a struggle to find representation for diverse interests (Bourne & Walker, 2020).

Although typologies may be very useful in practical terms, research also warns of the possible downsides of rigid categorisation. Segmentation in stakeholder engagement can help establish rigidity more significantly, mostly excluding emerging interests or evolving priorities that develop while the project progresses. It is evidenced by studies by Franklin (2020) and Butt et al. (2021) concerning public projects that stakeholder needs could change considering project developments or changes in public opinion. For instance, a peripheral group might gain power with the rise of environmental or social issues, making it a must to re-evaluate their priority level in the project.

Towards this end, it is proposed that a normative framework be put in place, one that expands the approach to include stakeholders who would not only be immediately involved but also those indirectly affected or invested in the project outcomes, independent of their influence at present (Schmidt et al., 2020). Normative identification widens the lens of stakeholder inclusion, bringing into primary focus considerations of ethical import and recognition that all parties impacted, directly or indirectly, hold a legitimate stake in the project. This approach will resonate with democratic values, significantly where projects may impact directly on community welfare and sustainable futures (Park & Lee, 2015). The inclusivity of stakeholder identification is theoretically perfect but practically constrained by balancing inclusivity and feasibility. A strategic approach to public projects navigates this through typologies for prioritisation of stakeholder identification yet allows flexibility to change as the stakeholder landscape changes. By blending practical with normative approaches, public institutions can create a stakeholder engagement framework that is representative and adaptive. This leads to fewer conflicts while fostering a supportive sustainable project outcome.

2.5. Stakeholder Communication

Segmentation in stakeholder engagement will create rigidity by mostly excluding emerging interests or evolving priorities that develop during the project. Franklin (2020) and Butt et al. (2021), concerning public projects, have proven that stakeholder needs can change the base. For stakeholder identification and engagement to be done effectively, it relies on establishing strong, dynamic communication channels between the organisation and its stakeholders, especially those whose influence may emerge at different project stages. Recent research shows that while primary stakeholders can be identified early on, secondary stakeholders may become relevant as the project develops, often based on new priorities or emerging issues (Butt et al., 2019). Depending on the developments of the project or changes in public opinion. By mobilising resources and support, these emergent stakeholders may also significantly impact the project results if their concerns are not addressed in time. This agrees with the purpose of the study, which is to improve stakeholder management by underlining ongoing identification and adaptive communication systems.

While helpful in stakeholder engagement, implementing participatory strategies is always resource-intensive and time-consuming, which may cause delays if not well-managed (Franklin, 2020). Based on the research, dual communication platforms catering to the initial and emergent stakeholders can prevent delays and ensure that claims are addressed effectively

(Talley et al., 2016). The adaptive two-way communication in this model helps bridge gaps caused by traditional, static approaches to communication that often leave out later-stage stakeholders, preventing the potential for conflicts due to responses or feedback loops delayed or neglected.

This is further supported by recent public project management research that flags these delays in establishing proper two-way communication originating from internal perceptions that active participation by all stakeholders is not always needed. This perception tends to cause the loss of opportunities for early collaboration and may invite future conflicts (Franklin, 2020; Dalton, 2019b). These conflicts could be based on false expectations about priorities in communications, effectiveness of feedback, and allocation of resources, which may impede mutual learning and collaboration crucial to problem-solving during project implementation. Ultimately, the study's goal of fostering better stakeholder engagement is supported by these insights, which advocate for continuous, flexible communication platforms to address current and emergent stakeholder needs. Such a model can enable the organisation to remain responsive to dynamic stakeholder influence, minimising delays and conflicts that could hinder project success.

2.5.1. Importance of communication

Recent research has shown that communication platforms are a not-for-profit necessity for stimulating mutual learning and collaboration between organisations and stakeholders in complex public projects. Effective communication platforms enable the sharing of different perspectives by the stakeholders and the negotiation of joint solutions, aligning to improve stakeholder engagement in the Department. As noted by Butt et al. (2021), a properly structured communication platform allows for early-stage and ongoing engagement that would be important in handling evolving project demands and reducing the likelihood of conflict. This supports the purpose of this study, which was to enhance stakeholder collaboration, especially regarding South Africa's environmental projects, where dynamic stakeholder environments result from diverse interests and socio-economic factors.

The concept of a "normative basis" for communication, as propounded by Habermas's communicative rationality, finds particularly fertile ground in contexts like South Africa. Park and Lee (2015) underpin deliberative systems that are consensus-oriented and democratic; the study offers an ivory tower for inclusive stakeholder communication in developing

democracies public sector projects, where stakes are often diverse and sometimes conflicting, find fertile ground for these ideals. According to Talley et al. (2016), a deliberative and shared-understanding-based communication system may align stakeholder and project objectives. From a practical perspective, this would entail developing communication frameworks that give space for all stakeholder voices and reduce instances of strategic or instrumental rationality, wherein stakeholders may seek only to further individual interests without regard for collective project goals.

The literature on stakeholder engagement foregrounds the role of "communicative rationality," an idea based on dialogue seeking mutual understanding without control or influence over the other parties involved. According to Franklin (2020), communicative rationality in stakeholder engagement enhances the transparency culture among the stakeholders, and hence, they will be well-equipped to handle their everyday challenges and come up with shared solutions. For example, when environmental projects emphasise open dialogue and co-creation of solutions, stakeholders demonstrate more trust and long-term commitment to the project results, thereby providing greater project sustainability (Dalton, 2019b). Communicative rationality supports the research goal of fostering an inclusive stakeholder environment conducive to proactive and cooperative engagement by enabling social learning and co-creation.

Furthermore, practical approaches to creating effective communication systems involve digital tools and real-time feedback loops, particularly beneficial in rapidly changing environments. As Franklin (2020) suggests, the tools bring about a better communication equity where historically marginalised stakeholders can access and contribute to discourses. This is particularly important when physical engagement is constrained by logistics or resource availability, something familiar for large-scale environmental projects. Therefore, establishing accessible, multi-channel communication platforms supports the study's objective to improve stakeholder communication efficacy, facilitating meaningful engagement throughout the project lifecycle. It should, therefore, have the most formidable communicative platform that is inclusive of its people, ensuring mutual understanding and support in adaptive communication methods at par with the changing needs of diverse stakeholder groups. Such a framework would further strengthen stakeholder engagement and alignment with project outcomes, fostering the Department's commitment to collaborative sustainable environmental management.

2.6. Stakeholder Analysis

2.6.1. The General Case

Recent research shows that stakeholder analysis models underpin the identification of relevant participants and understanding their motivations, influence, and potential impact on project decision-making. This will empower the organisation to foretell, by analysing the actions, perceptions, and agendas of stakeholders, the probable influence each group may have on project outcomes (Butt et al., 2019).

This underpins the research objective to enhance stakeholder analysis to improve project alignment with stakeholder expectations. Integrating stakeholder analysis into a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) framework allows organisations to analyse the internal and external factors that might impact project success. For example, Franklin (2020) notes that a SWOT-informed stakeholder analysis allows one to establish potential synergies and conflicts among stakeholders, supporting proactive risk management. This helps the organisation align project goals with stakeholder needs while considering and addressing potential conflicts early. (Butt et al., 2019). This underpins the research objective to enhance stakeholder analysis to improve project alignment with stakeholder expectations. Integrating stakeholder analysis into a SWOT framework gives organisations more ability to analyse the internal and external factors that might impact project success. For example, Franklin (2020) notes that a SWOT-informed stakeholder analysis allows one to establish potential synergies and conflicts among stakeholders, supporting proactive risk management. This helps the organisation align project goals with stakeholder needs while considering and addressing potential conflicts early.

2.6.2. Findings from Empirical Evidence

Understanding the complicated interplay of these variables, organisations can anticipate potential conflicts, especially between stakeholders who perceive their concerns as marginalised. As indicated by Butt et al. (2019), stakeholders with little power or legitimacy will organise support from outside to make their voices heard, perhaps disturbing project impetus. This study systematically identified stakeholder claims concerning their salience and analysed the status and urgency of these claims to pre-empt conflicting interests in line with the study's goal, which was inclusive and cooperative stakeholder relations. The updated framework allows a multi-indicator approach to stakeholder analysis since power and interests

might change over a project's lifecycle. So, by weaving together power, legitimacy, urgency, and other indicators, practical stakeholder analysis is the foundation to minimise conflicts, support collaborative engagement, and achieve project objectives in a complex stakeholder environment.

2.6.3. The Popular Analytical Model

Recent studies have further developed the stakeholder salience framework, addressing the dynamic nature of stakeholder interactions in project management. This framework, grounded in power, legitimacy, and urgency, remains a foundation for prioritising stakeholders based on their influence and importance. However, research has shown that stakeholder dynamics evolve over a project's lifecycle, and actors may leverage various strategies to increase their salience, such as coalition-building and resource enhancement, which can shift their influence over time (Aaltonen et al., 2008; ElWakeel & Andersen, 2019). These complex relationships would call for flexible stakeholder engagement strategies by a project manager. For instance, Nguyen et al. (2019) point out that static models often fail to consider stakeholders' ability to develop new sources of influence, which may be mobilising public support against project progress. The static approaches are, therefore, oblivious to how latent stakeholders may become active, significantly as they increase in power over the project life cycle.

Thus, project conflicts must integrate a dynamic model that considers changing stakeholder salience, mostly in diverse political environments. This assures the challenges viewed in designing and implementing public projects, where the involvement of the initial stakeholder may not be sufficient due to emerging conflicts as the project progresses (Bahadorestani et al., 2023). In effect, modern studies have criticised static models of stakeholder salience and are calling for a much more fluid understanding of stakeholder power with adaptation in shifting dynamics throughout project lifecycles.

2.6.4. Applications to the Present Case

While this has certain limitations in static frameworks, the stakeholder salience model does help to exemplify the position and influence of the internal stakeholders within project discourses that engage different external stakeholders. Indeed, much current research indicates the need for dynamic stakeholder frameworks as projects progress and interests evolve with emerging new power structures. This would also mean that in highly diverse stakeholder projects, some actors would not have conventional resources or political power but instead gain

salience through legislative or regulatory support. These "latent" stakeholders might activate as a project progresses and bring new interests and unexpected costs (ElWakeel & Andersen, 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019).

The variable of urgency identified by Mitchell et al. (1997) is very much alive, with studies affirming that stakeholder claims often need immediate attention due to time sensitivity or salience of their demands. Based on this, protest leaders, for instance, are found to use urgency and unpredictability to challenge decision-makers by employing strategies that either rapidly dissipate or grow in strategic intensity, dependent on the protest's goals (Shafique & Gabriel, 2022). These dynamics underscore why stakeholder and organisational interests may frequently diverge, as noted in the analysis of stakeholder-driven problem definitions and decision-making influences (Raha et al., 2021).

Stakeholder analysis models thus increasingly recognise the necessity of tracking dynamic changes in power and interests. Identifying and involving key stakeholder groups, especially those with immediate influence over the environmental and public project, was top on the list, aided by static models. However, emergent conflicts point out the limitations of such models for grasping the changeable nature of stakeholder positions over a project's lifecycle. In this regard, dynamic models become essential in proactively managing conflicts and engaging stakeholders as timelines of projects progress (Khurram & Pestre, 2019).

2.7. Stakeholder Engagement, Management, and Evaluation

2.7.1. Engagement

Studies emphasise that effective stakeholder identification and communication are critical to successful engagement and management in environmental projects. Building an open communication system that fosters reciprocal feedback and trust remains central to these processes. For instance, stakeholder engagement frameworks stress the importance of continuous, structured dialogue to reinforce trust and convergence in outcomes, thus supporting strategic project goals and sustainable development (Haddaway et al., 2017).

Stakeholder engagement in the environment acts not only for the sharing of information but also as an instrument of social learning, where participants, through interaction, collaboratively define goals that enable them to navigate through the competition of interests constructively (Watson et al., 2018). This engagement benefits organisations by allowing them insights into

stakeholders' needs and, at the same time, promoting an organisation's reputation, hence ensuring a stable foundation for continued partnership. For instance, sustainable communication practices prevent the adverse effects of weak stakeholder relations with social mobilisation and reputational risks from derailing project objectives from taking off, as noted in cases in the practice of environmental management (Holifield & Williams, 2019).

Furthermore, social learning frameworks share a common vision of values and goals that are essential in the long run of sustainability efforts, where free access to negotiation and lobbying resources harmonises the different goals of stakeholders (Mathur et al., 2008). Stakeholder engagement mechanisms in efficient environmental projects must consider flexibility, feedback, and transparent communication to represent all stakeholder interests and support adaptive decision-making over time (Bernat et al., 2023).

2.7.2. Management

Recent research highlights the importance of maintaining effective stakeholder management by fostering a continuous exchange of information between organisations and stakeholders, using dynamic communication strategies to facilitate feedback and adaptive engagement. Proactive stakeholder management, which includes seeking and integrating stakeholder input early in the process, helps prevent passive or dormant participation from becoming a barrier when stakeholders are later motivated to engage actively due to emerging developments (Ezeh et al., 2024).

Utilising mechanisms such as structured feedback sessions via review and comment forums, public meetings, or online platforms has proven essential in environmental management. These mechanisms facilitate stakeholder input and dialogue, helping decision-makers gauge preferences, assess policy reactions, and adapt to changing perspectives, ultimately leading to more sustainable and resilient project outcomes (Holifield & Williams, 2019). Consultative platforms, including brainstorming sessions and collaborative policy development forums, allow stakeholders to contribute substantively to decision-making processes, especially in complex projects where early-stage input is crucial for addressing emergent issues. These platforms enhance long-term support by aligning stakeholder interests with project goals and fostering shared responsibility for sustainable project outcomes (Dadpour et al., 2019).

2.8. Theories underpinning the study

The study employed a stakeholder management theory, which views strategic management as a group of techniques directed at constructing relationships with the organisation's stakeholders, defined as affecting or being affected by the entity's activities. The strategic management umbrella houses the four concepts that have formed the basis of the previous discussion; these are shown in the figure below:



Figure 1: The strategic management umbrella

Source: Adapted from SustaiNet Software¹

According to this approach, the elements under the umbrella enable organisations to undertake effective stakeholder management and build working relationships to achieve stakeholder collaboration. The stakeholder management model utilises stakeholder identification, analysis, communication, and engagement to collaborate with stakeholders to help the organisation achieve its strategic project objectives (Cobb & Elder, 2012). The outcomes of effective stakeholder management can be seen in adequate project support, mutual trust and willingness on the part of stakeholders to transact with the organisation. Other outcomes include proactive

¹ <https://www.sustainet.com/stakeholder-management-umbrella/>

identification and assessment of potential roadblocks in project implementation and identification of competing objectives among the various stakeholders in the project (Cobb & Elder, 2012).

This model was applied to this research study in developing a framework for strategic collaboration between the Department and its stakeholders to find ways to mitigate the present challenges in the relationship the Department presently sustains with its stakeholders to develop mutual understanding and trust vital to its project implementation (Cobb & Elder, 2012). It was assumed that the non-inclusion of critical and emergent stakeholders in the Department had resulted from poor systems and practices of stakeholder identification, which had seen some stakeholders, particularly the project recipient communities, needing to be included in decision-making and project development. As a result, their interests collided and conflicted with those of the Department. Such interests ranged from problems that needed redress in those communities, how the problem should be defined, the optimal interventions, and even the contractual bases of those engaged in project deployment. These and numerous other issues lie at the heart of conflicting interests, which require effective stakeholder identification to aid their effective integration into the department's decision-making processes (EDTEA, 2017).

This model provided the tools for practical stakeholder analysis, which, as discussed earlier, is essential in assessing the nature and potency of the interests of the various stakeholders in a given project. Given the dynamic nature of power, legitimacy or salience of the stakeholders, the development of an evolving system of analysis was argued to be important in mapping the changing interests of stakeholders across a project timeline. The assumption was that a lack of understanding of the Department's stakeholder interests contributed to the transacting challenges with the various stakeholders (EDTEA, 2017). With effective stakeholder identification and stakeholder analysis, effective platforms or systems of communication can be established, resulting in non-participation of stakeholders or opposition towards the project and the organisation. A combination of these has been argued to contribute to limited stakeholder engagement in the Department, although sometimes reported as low stakeholder participation (eThekwini, 2019; EDTEA, 2017). This framework enabled the researcher to develop a framework for effective stakeholder management, addressing the present challenges and creating a platform for better collaboration between the Department and its stakeholders.

2.8.1. Existing stakeholder practice

2.8.1.1. *Various ways of undertaking stakeholder engagement*

Generally, stakeholder engagement can be general or situational. In general stakeholder engagement, the organisation establishes a regime in which voluntary stakeholder input is gathered as data to create a baseline framework of stakeholder perceptions, interests, and preferences. This framework will represent stakeholders' values who interact regularly with the organisation, which is updated concerning their perspectives on its current performance (Dalton, 2019). Situational stakeholder engagement focuses on intermittent activities directed at gathering data on emerging issues in the external operating environment or for considering possibilities of opportunities where the organisation may change its activities to improve its standing and enhance its performance (Krick et al., 2005; Dalton, 2019b; Franklin, 2020a). Situational stakeholder engagement may also refer to periodic data collection to inform specific strategic activities, such as routinised planning processes for fine-tuning organisational activities and strategic decision-making, promoting agility in policy implementation. Thus, the organisation can benefit from having access to custom-tailored preference data (Krick et al., 2005; Franklin, 2020b).

To acquire this data during situational stakeholder engagement, however, may require extending selecting invitations so that preferences of particular stakeholders, such as those who are highly influential or influenced by the organisation's actions or those most likely to be positively or negatively affected by a decision, are gathered (Dalton, 2019b). Whatever the form of stakeholder engagement assumes, it must be understood that it goes beyond making the organisation's decisions and activities transparent, offering participation mechanisms that make it possible for stakeholders to access the organisation, or even purposefully facilitating stakeholder access to provide representative input to inform decisions. It incorporates collaborative and synergistic processes that benefit the organisation and stakeholders in broader ways, such as accountability, efficacy, empowerment and sustainability (Dyson, 1999; Choi & Wang, 2009; Dalton, 2019b; Krane, et al., 2020). Thus, while some structures of stakeholder engagement can be designed and operational, they are only effective and beneficial to both the organisation and its stakeholders, where collaborative structures that facilitate cooperative relationships and accountability between actors exist. This may be instrumental in understanding the Department's challenges in engaging its community-level stakeholders (Mkhize, 2018).

2.8.1.2. Returns to Stakeholder Engagement

In the problem statement, it was argued that the costs of conflict and diverging interests between the Department and its stakeholders have been significantly high, with associated costs in terms of strained relations and project hampering through vandalism (eThekwini, 2015; Mkhize, 2018). Stakeholder engagement processes increase the likelihood that all stakeholders' interests affected by or affecting the organisation's activities can be identified and considered. Purposefully identifying stakeholders and comparing those with current interaction and those with whom the organisation could strategically interact can make an organisation more accessible. General stakeholder engagement leverages the input voluntarily provided by motivated stakeholders, thus providing the requisite information for establishing a baseline of perceptions and preferences depicting stakeholders who commonly interact with the organisation and how they feel about the present activities (Franklin, 2020). The argument behind effective stakeholder management, as presented in this theoretical model, with a particular focus on stakeholder management, is that there would be positive returns and benefits to the Department if the stakeholder management process was understood and stakeholder engagement maintained effectively. Four of these benefits are outlined here. Firstly, there is a strengthened ability to assess and manage stakeholder-related risks.

This is possible since those with a right to be heard are consulted, and their interests and considerations are mapped and incorporated into decision-making and project execution. Thus, project ownership and political buy-in are achieved, leading to successful and beneficial cooperation (Krick et al., 2005). Secondly, stakeholder engagement increases the organisation's credibility among stakeholders (Thoreau, 2020). One of the problems Departments in the eThekwini Municipality struggle with was credibility among its constituencies and stakeholders. This has been seen in its reports to stem from corruption and its capacity to undermine democratic processes, which lie at the heart of stakeholder engagement (eThekwini, 2015, 2019; Mkhize, 2018). Thirdly, in the context of public programmes, where there are perspectives that transcend financial considerations and are more premised on cultural issues, stakeholder engagement ensures collaboration to address problems and opportunities and to integrate information that may positively influence the sustainability of public projects (Krick et al., 2005; Mkhize, 2018). Finally, stakeholder engagement enables public organisations to improve their relations with recipient communities and their representatives through enhancing opportunities for learning and gaining insights from non-traditional sources. Thus, the Department, in this case, could learn about community interests and views by communicating

directly with stakeholders and mitigating risks associated with community action and protest action (Krick et al., 2005). A classic case of community outcry concerned Durban South Basin port expansion, where the community living in proximity to the port area raised concerns concerning the envisioned port and combined their efforts to derail government efforts through collaborating with other stakeholders such as universities and civil society (Bracking and Diga, 2015). Such outcomes are mitigated through effective stakeholder engagement; these outlined benefits are a few of the many that can be stated and outlined.

2.8.2. Applying the Model to the present study

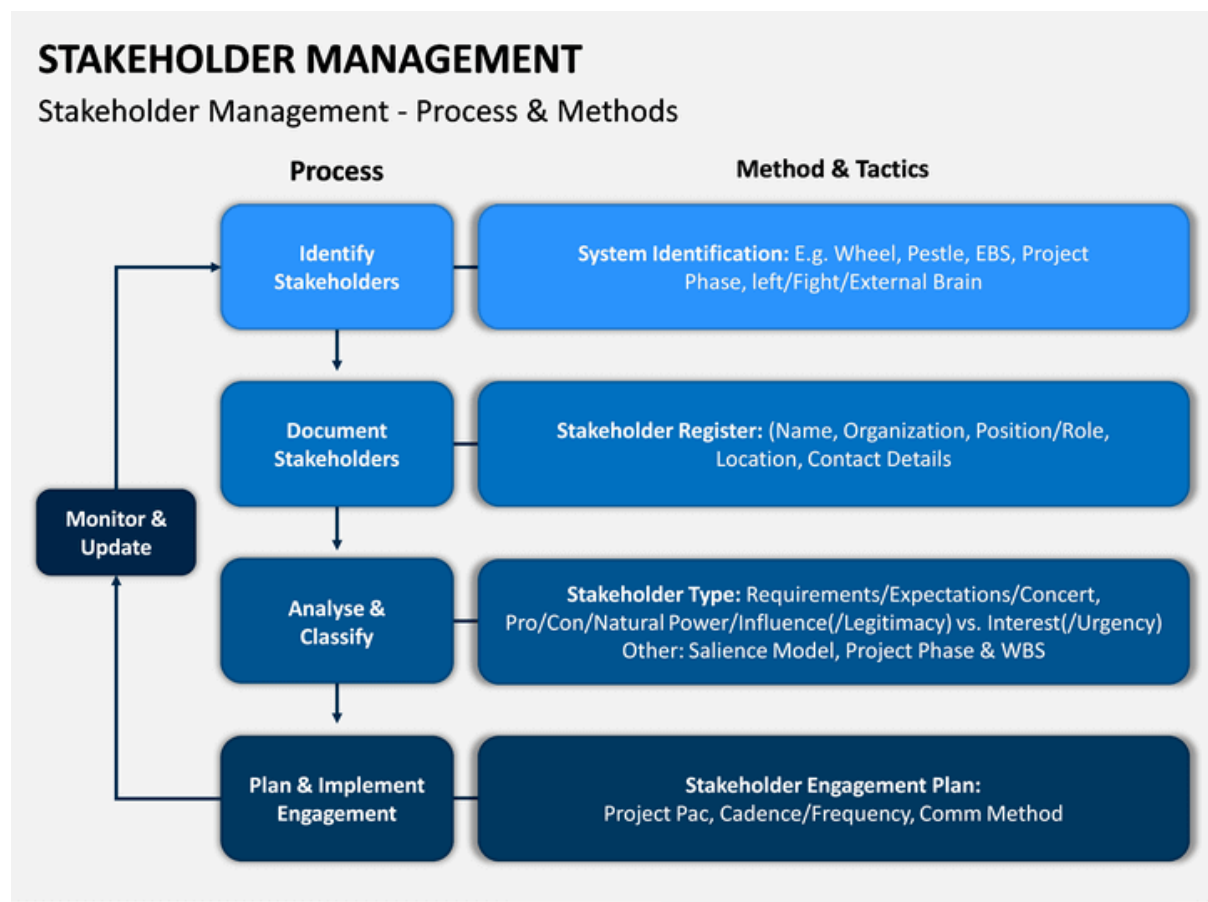


Figure 2: The Stakeholder Management Model

Source: (Dalton, 2019b).

The stakeholder management model is based on effective stakeholder management for success. Organisational operation maps stakeholders' interests and influence as they promote their views and perspectives concerning how their welfare can be maintained. The preceding sections outlined this view by examining four aspects characterising instrumental stakeholder management theory: stakeholder identification, analysis, communication and engagement. The underlying assumption is that there is an existing disjuncture between how the stakeholders

view the way. Public management bodies plan and implement their policies, with the only effective mechanism for incorporating these views being value-free stakeholder management protocols to enable effective interaction between the various stakeholders and the organisation.

The application of the discussed model to the present study is based on a central focus of the argument that conflicts that have been witnessed between the Department and its various stakeholders, particularly community participants, have been a result of the rationality informing the approach to stakeholder engagement (Nxumalo, 2010; Bracking & Diga, 2015; Parikh et al., 2020). It has been argued that this rationality is observed in top-down approaches in stakeholder engagement with no broadened focus towards understanding their interests and aggregating them into decisions concerning projects designed to improve their welfare. This was seen and discussed in the analysis of Integrated Development Plans (IDPs), which have been instrumental policies for socio-economic development across the country. These documents reveal a basic understanding of underlying societal challenges such as demographic, socioeconomic, environmental, and so forth (eThekweni, 2011, 2015, 2018, 2019). Focus was placed on understanding the nature of these perceived challenges, which then informed interventions without necessarily incorporating broadly through dialogue the recipient communities, resulting in clashes over several issues such as partnerships in development planning, cost implications, design of the projects and the welfare implications (this has been critical in South Durban economic development project and its impacts on the Clairwood community within proximity of the designated expansion route) (Bracking & Diga, 2015).

Thus, in employing this model, the assumption was made that instrumental stakeholder theory envisions the aggregation and incorporation of all stakeholders in the thinking, design and execution of the organisation's decisions. In other words, if all stakeholders were effectively incorporated through effective representation and aggregation of their interests, then conflicts could not result or would be minimised between the Department and its stakeholders (Jones, et al., 2018). In this study, therefore, a mapping was made of the methods of stakeholder identification, stakeholder analysis, stakeholder communication and stakeholder engagement employed by the Department to understand and aggregate the interests of its stakeholders using the following mapping model, which follows from the umbrella model presented in figure 2.2.6 above.

The framework was employed to assess stakeholder identification using three specific tools: PESTLE (political, environmental, social, technological, legislative and economic) analysis,

expert judgement in stakeholder identification and identification by invitation procedure. The latter concept follows from the discussion of IDPs employed by eThekweni Municipality and how various procedures invite stakeholders to participate. Based on these attributes, the model was used to assess the attributes that feature in classifying the interest and influence of the stakeholders on the Department's initiatives. For instance, to analyse what identified attributes enable the classification of a stakeholder as having HI-HI (high interest, high influence), HI-LI (high interest, low influence), LI-LI (low interest, low impact) and LI-HI (low interest, high influence).

The communication model employed in identifying and engaging stakeholders was analysed through exploration and evaluation. In exploring, an analysis was made of how the stakeholders were identified, how communication was made to build stakeholder trust, and how issues such as the context of the project/issue were communicated to various stakeholders. The evaluation focused on ongoing stakeholder participation, setting agendas and objectives, and the institutionalised stakeholder communication model. Thus, in implementing this model in the study, the four aspects of the stakeholder management umbrella model were considered in a decomposed analysis.

2.8.3. Literature review on stakeholders: Identification, analysis, communication facilitation and engagement

2.8.3.1. *Stakeholder identification at eThekweni Department of Economic Development Tourism and Environmental Affairs*

Data from reports published between 2015 and 2020 by the Department and studies conducted on stakeholder engagement shows that while there is a general realisation within the Department on the importance of public participation in decision-making, the incorporation of stakeholders' interests has been, at best, informal and ad-hoc. In other studies, this has been reported to marginalise some crucial groups, bias interest aggregation, and jeopardise the long-term viability of the organisation and support for its processes (Reed et al., 2009).

Generally, in South Africa, multi-stakeholder engagement is a legislated requirement for organisations, clearly stating that good governance should incorporate broader multi-stakeholder engagement in decision-making processes (Mkhize, 2018). Within local economic development planning, particularly in eThekweni Municipality, IDPs were the adopted operation instruments in which the government sought to transform the structural differences

of the previously divided society while aggregating the interest of the recipient constituencies in decision-making (Hlongwane, 2011).

The identification of stakeholders within these IDPs has been broad, including in its formulation the entire citizens of a municipal community in finding the best solutions to achieve sustainable long-term development. This was based on the understanding that communities cannot develop in isolation, with the community needs in one area, say housing, requiring the needs of other integrated services such as infrastructure provision (roads, schools, electricity, water and sanitation) (Hlongwane, 2011). Thus, soft thinking systems have been viewed as instrumental in aggregating diverse interests and the needs of broader categories of stakeholders to find consensus in building solutions based on spatial development planning. In integrated planning processes, citizen participation has been instrumented through participative democratic representation in which legislated ward committees have been engaged in consultative and communication channels in matters affecting the wards, including representing the community on compilation and implementation of integrated development plans and ensuring harmonious interaction and consensus building between the municipality and the community (eThekweni, 2015).

Apart from wards, traditional communities were identified with their designated governors/leaders (Amakhosi), who represent the interests of those areas. According to the delivery agreement of the IDP, the goal was to ensure a responsive, accountable, effective and efficient local government system to build and restore citizen confidence in local government structures. To achieve this, it was proposed that municipalities needed to ensure that local communities' needs were met, such as building clean, effective, responsive and accountable local government, improving performance and strengthening the relationship between the local government and its identified stakeholders, communities and civil society (eThekweni, 2015). The top-down approach to stakeholder identification and engagement can be observed from the expected outcomes of the IDP. These included implementing a differentiated approach to municipal financing, planning and support; improving access to essential services; implementing community work programmes; actions supportive of the human settlement outcomes; deepening democracy through a refined ward committee model; improving administrative and financial capability and facilitating a single window of coordination (eThekweni, 2015). These outcomes were modelled as the expected future and how the communities could be integrated to achieve these outcomes. The power dynamics among stakeholders were observable in the list of expected outcomes, such as community works

programmes envisioned for local communities, structured participation through refined ward committees, and access to essential services. The report also noted that challenges to the implementation and outcomes of the IDP stemmed from a lack of community engagement and participation, service delivery and public perception and the costly stakeholder engagement systems (eThekweni IDP, 2022/23).

The report also noted several areas that identified poor stakeholder identification and engagement and its associated challenges. Among the critical development challenges identified were loss of natural capital (poor environment management at the community level), unsustainable development practices, high levels of crime and risk, challenges in ensuring adequate energy and water supply, infrastructure degradation, climate change mitigation challenges, ensuring financial sustainability and ineffectiveness and inefficiency of inward-looking local government still prevalent in the Municipality (eThekweni, 2015). Thus, the report acknowledged that stakeholder identification was chiefly based on internal organisational considerations, which, according to Habermas (1987), can be argued to be based on instrumental rationality identified in the preceding sections of this review (Prell et al., 2008; Reed et al., 2009).

Regarding environmental management, the goal of the Department was stated as ensuring management and protection of the municipality's ecosystems and finite natural resources, which deliver essential ecological services such as water supply, flood attenuation, and climate control and which provide the foundation for human life and development (eThekweni, 2015). Towards meeting these objectives, an eight-point plan with strategic objectives was listed with key performance areas and strategic focus areas. An investigation of the strategic focus areas showed that under local economic development, integrating some groups of influential stakeholders facilitated private sector investment and partnerships without any specific mention of the inclusion of the recipient communities in the outline (eThekweni, 2015). Thus, the evidence of internal stakeholder identification that at practice focuses on highly influential stakeholders with access to resources and whose support was indispensable for the envisioned plans of the local development planners.

The 2022/23 IDP noted several significant improvements concerning stakeholder involvement. It was stated that responsiveness to local conditions and demands required programmes that the Municipality had implemented to facilitate broader stakeholder engagement at the regional level, to listen to what people on the ground wanted and respond to their demands and ensure

that policies were aligned to the needs of citizens (eThekwini, 2019). Accordingly, the report outlined conflicts between the local government and the citizens at the ground level, particularly in the development of infrastructure projects. As such, the creation of some platforms for stakeholder engagement was seen as instrumental, which included the Msakhane Campaign, the creation of stakeholder engagement forums, community-based planning, ward committees, traditional leaders and others to ensure broader representation and extend support to vulnerable groups to encourage their participation in local communities (eThekwini, 2019). While this reflected the change in focus in stakeholder identification, the top-down approach towards broader groups of stakeholders, that is, those with less power except their representation, can be seen in the creation of platforms for their representation, while the need for inclusion in decision-making those who have access to resources that can facilitate some key municipal projects could also be observed. To some extent, conflicts can stem over time from the fact that there are differences in returns and expectations over the deployment of projects, as private sector stakeholders had broader considerations for return on investment, while local communities were focusing on the social marginal benefit, which represented diverging valuations and hence perspectives and outcomes. In the consolidated SWOT analysis presented in section 2.6.1 outlining municipal transformation and institutional development, the report stated that public participation was driven by compliance and that public involvement was approached as a top-down process (eThekwini, 2019).

2.8.3.2. *Stakeholder analysis practices at eThekwini Department of Economic Development Tourism and Environmental Affairs*

An analysis of the official publications from the Durban government reveals a preoccupation with influential stakeholders in local development planning. A top-down approach was undertaken for community-level stakeholders such as general citizens and those identified as vulnerable, unemployed or impoverished (eThekwini, 2015, 2019; Mkhize, 2018). A study on the institutional capacity of local government in KwaZulu-Natal concluded that the absence of proper structures in stakeholder analysis of effective inter-institutional collaboration for development results from the observed lack of institutional efficiency and capacity. The article alluded to operational inefficiencies related to the lack of competent Local Economic Development (LED) officials as well as financial-related inefficiencies that leave these institutions dependent on external institutions which have sectional interests in most cases divorced from the realities of stakeholder collaboration required for deliberated development planning (Khambule & Mtapuri, 2018).

Historically, the transformation of local government in South Africa was based on the need to ensure the inclusion of citizens, communities, and groups in society who, historically, through apartheid exclusionary policies and divided development, were excluded from policy and decision-making processes (Njenga, 2009). Through integrated planning, the LED agencies were to effectively implement the inclusion of the broader spectrum of these stakeholders. The general understanding was that community groups and marginal societies needed a representation and a platform so that their demands and interests, critical to local development and livelihood sustainability, could be communicated and expressed. This required that the IDP clearly outline the nature of the interests, demands and dynamics of these stakeholders, who were identified as marginalised and historically unable to participate in decisions that affected their livelihood options (Njenga, 2009). As noted earlier, stakeholder analysis is concerned with understanding the nature of the stakeholders, their interests and how they articulate them so that the organisation can effectively engage with them through consultation and information exchange in an initiative. In line with this understanding, an analysis of government-level publications revealed that among the many conceptualisations of public participation by municipalities was the commitment to involving communities in the decision-making process of development projects. Another critical conceptualisation of public participation in the IDP process associated public participation with democracy and governance, with ward committees employed as structures for public participation within local communities (Njenga, 2009; eThekweni, 2019). The challenges with these forms of community participation were that they were formed without consultation of how these communities should be represented, and frequently, with an assortment of local developmental problems, local communities still need to have a narrower range of demands around which they can coalesce. The vast sections of the population within these wards were observed to require immediate pathways out of poverty, unemployment and inequality; the unequal development in the rural-urban dynamic resulted in residents in metro-areas being satisfied with service delivery while viewing unemployment, poverty and lack of access to finance as challenges. Other issues included scarce and critical skills shortages, a skewed dual economy, and backlogs in providing essential service delivery with limited funding available to deal with these backlogs (eThekweni, 2015, 2019).

Thus, the diversity of interests and local development challenges resulted in a dual representation of stakeholder interests and concerns in integrated development planning observed in the organisation's reports and documents. A case in point is articulating community-based stakeholder interests and those of private sector organisations and

partnerships. Within ward community forums and other similar forums, focus was placed on issues such as high unemployment rates and low economic growth, high levels of poverty, low levels of skills development and literacy, limited access to household and community services, increased incidence of HIV and other communicable diseases, loss of natural capital and high levels of crime (eThekweni, 2019:17). In this stakeholder analysis and the initiatives proposed in the IDPs were proposed as potential pathways in meeting these local challenges. Accordingly, it was stated in the document, “strategic planning for the municipality fundamentally follows a top-down approach which includes policy directives at the global scale down to the municipal scale” (eThekweni, 2019:19). The communication of these plans at the local level of stakeholder participation instrumental rationality, designed to establish ways in which communities can align their interests with the outline’s strategies of the local government to implement the established view of local development. Thus, no stakeholder analysis seeks to independently categorise the stakeholders’ interests and understand the motivations for their participation and the nature in which they might envision their participation in decision-making.

2.8.3.3. *Stakeholder Communication at eThekweni Department of Economic Development Tourism and Environmental Affairs*

Public participation in local governance and development initiatives, as stated earlier, finds its basis in statutory legislation, Act 108 of 1996, which provides for the promotion of social and economic development, safe and healthy environments and encouragement of the involvement of communities and community organisations in matters of local government (Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008). However, public participation in spheres of government has been riddled with operational challenges, from local government institutional inefficiencies to a need for more structures (eThekweni, 2015). Local government departments or municipalities are bound by legislation to involve local communities and civic organisations in formulating municipal budgets and planning and development priorities. IDPs have been instrumental in building a culture of local community participation. Rahmawati and Agustina (2023) argue that community participation can be both an end and a means of sustainable development. In conclusion, community participation rests on the principle that people should be involved and allowed control over actions that affect their welfare. Thus, to promote sustainable development, empowerment, communication and gender are imperative (Kellerman, 1997; Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008).

In the IDP document of the eThekweni Municipality, environmental management planning focused on improving good governance. The report stated some focus areas, including engagement and contact with citizens; partnerships with business, civil society and other government departments; competence, capacity and decision-making; and transparency, engagement and care for staff (eThekweni, 2019). The municipality's role is to ensure all citizens have access to essential services, promote democracy and human rights, and promote economic and sectoral development through its operational departments. To this end, municipal departments are urged to establish a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative participatory government. This was extended towards encouraging and creating conditions for the community to participate in the affairs of the municipality and its departments (eThekweni, 2015, 2018, 2019).

Meaningful participation, as envisioned in the eThekweni Municipality participation policy of 2006, designed to increase citizen participation in government decision-making processes, acknowledged the need for effective communication mechanisms (Ngubane, 2014). The community participation policy aimed to create an enabling environment for civil society, ordinary citizens and social groups to provide platforms to voice and deliberate their concerns and participate in fundamental decision-making processes (Ngubane, 2014). Reviewing the stakeholder engagement plan outlined in the 2012 eThekweni IDP revealed a structured communication model in which the Municipality initiates information communications. The figure below shows a pictorial outline of the engagement processes and various communications.

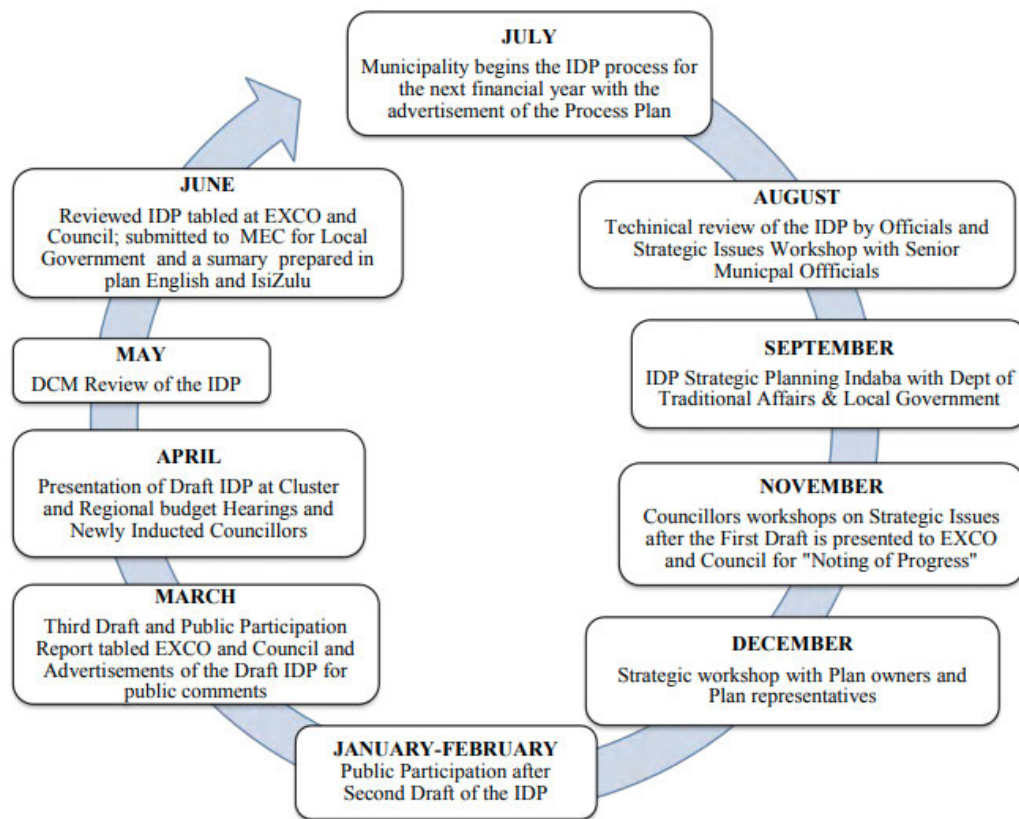


Figure 2: Stakeholder Participation Model

Source: (eThekwini, 2012).

It can be noticed that communication with stakeholders initially took the form of advertisements for participation in the planning of the next cycle IDP in July, with advertisement of the process plan. Secondly, in-depth dialogues with strategic stakeholders like ward councillors and strategic engagement workshops where information is exchanged with other strategic partners are conducted in November and December. Invitation for public participation between January and February with follow-up communications through reports and advertisements for public comments on draft documents (eThekwini, 2012, 2018). The communication process was observed to be initiated by the Department, with stakeholders responding to the Departmental pull communication strategy. Thus, community participation was based on merely sharing information, obtaining community and public views (consultation), and working inter-alia with the general public (involvement). This observed communication model was based on the Department's communications policy, in which the municipality indicated its commitment to a two-way communication system with stakeholders. The city proposed strategic communication based on a commitment to transparency and

effective relationships with its stakeholders through consultation and information dissemination (eThekwini, 2012; Mnguni, 2018). In the communications policy, the municipality clearly outlined its responsibility to inform its stakeholders of its initiatives and projects, including the various projects encapsulated in the IDP process. Within this communication policy, the communication strategy was directed towards creating awareness of Departmental programmes, information sharing and communication for people-centred service delivery. In this strategy, the eThekwini Municipality's envisioned duty was where the departments commit to greater community involvement in decision-making. Furthermore, it was stated that people were likely to participate in the developmental agenda if they had access to requisite information and that effective communication was essential towards achieving participatory integrated development planning (Ngubane, 2014). Thus, conflicts can be assessed based on how much stakeholder input from the general constituency aligns with input gathered through departmental communication challenges. Where these differ, the disjuncture leads to conflicts and differences of views concerning projects.

2.8.3.4. *Stakeholder Engagement Practices at eThekwini Department of Economic Development Tourism and Environmental Affairs*

Municipal and department reports on various developmental initiatives reflected the case for both general and situational stakeholder engagement. The reports acknowledge the need to create conditions for community participation and capacity for community participation and collaboration (eThekwini, 2018; 2019). An earlier study noted that in developing a community engagement and participation culture, municipalities must develop a culture of municipal governance that complements formal representative government with participatory governance systems (Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008). In this study, the multifaceted nature of participation was observed, with Municipal stakeholders being seen to participate in developmental activities by providing information about the community, taking part in identifying developmental needs, problems and priorities, taking part in deciding about development goals, policies and strategies or assuming responsibility and accountability for development actions (Kellerman, 1997; Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008).

Consultative participation took three primary forms: structured participation, open opportunities and informal channels. In structured participation, engagement involves formal establishments of one or more citizen bodies with defined prerogatives and responsibilities, such as advisory committees and community engagement forums (Mkhize, 2018). Open opportunities are those set by local authorities or representatives in which any individual or

group may take part and are usually focused on just one or a few issues, such as specific issues about public service delivery within the constituency or other governance-related matters. These may include enquiries, hearings, or exhibitions where community participants can comment and ask questions. In stakeholder engagement, the analysis of eThekwini reports shows a clear dual strategy between those stakeholders who are partners with the Department in particular ways, such as financial investors towards proposed projects and those who are general community members whose welfare is determined by the results of the Department's decisions and initiatives through service provision, or opportunity creation (eThekwini, 2018; Duze & Reddy, 2020).

Structured stakeholder participation in development projects through eThekwini IDPs has been reported as council committees for low-influence, high-interest stakeholders in local communities. Focus groups involved in the Department's action research have been instrumental in working with environmental groups to generate detailed information about a wide range of specific needs and values (Mohangi, 2015). The eThekwini Municipality's IDPs also concern community-level stakeholders in poor and marginalised areas. Accordingly, they support the organisational development of associations, particularly in poor and marginalised areas where skills and resources for engagement may be less developed than in urban and better-off areas (Mngadi, 2013; eThekwini, 2018, 2019). Ward committees have been a central mechanism for community engagement in development planning. These are community-based advisory committees headed by the ward councillor as chairperson. Given the clashes and challenges of service delivery, much emphasis has been placed on ward committees as a mechanism to facilitate community engagement (Mngadi, 2013). The IDP (2019) states, "There has been a realisation over the past five years that responsiveness to community demands on local conditions and demands is at the core of creating effective and accountable governance that can enable the municipality to change the socioeconomic conditions of its citizens". To this end, it was noted that the municipality needed to broaden its platforms for community stakeholder engagement by implementing programmes to enable it to gather information on local community conditions (eThekwini, 2019). However, the top-down approach towards stakeholder engagement reveals instrumental rationality directed towards pacifying community-level stakeholders from harmful forms of promoting their interests that negatively affect the initiatives of the Municipality and its departments (Boaz et al., 2018).

2.8.3.5. *Community participation, conflict and engagement*

In another study assessing the state of the water provision dialogue between the Water utility and the local community participants, it was concluded that without public participation, the objectives of water resource management and socioeconomic improvement could not be achieved (Wilson et al., 2008). Both departmental reports (eThekwini, 2015; Mkhize, 2018) and empirical unpublished studies (Subban, 2009; Musyoka, 2010; Mzimela, 2013; Ngubane, 2014; Musavengane & Simatele, 2016) have demonstrated that since the opening of the second decade of the 21st century, there has been an observed broadening of initiatives for stakeholder participation. However, these have been aimed at advertising the change, soliciting public dialogue and input, networking the departmental programmes and competencies, and reflecting the need for scientific and technologically viable programmes to have embedded social viability (Boakye & Akpor, 2012). However, the second decade of the 21st century has also been characterised by increased participation in various public service issues from water resources management, sanitation, and more importantly environmental risk mitigation as various local level groups have taken an active role in the management of their local resources (Nxumalo, 2010; Musavengane & Simatele, 2016; Nkambule et al., 2016; Dlamini et al., 2017).

The active role taken by communities has been attributed in some studies to a loss of confidence in community-based participation through department-initiated platforms, which did not seem to incorporate the demands and views of these stakeholders in their implementation. For instance, in the water sector, a study showed that community-level stakeholder engagement with the Department has been characteristically weak and dominated by conflict-based complaint ethic on the part of stakeholder movements and a general lack of viable models for participation and correspondence forums for constructive dialogue and exchange between the municipality and these local communities (Wilson et al., 2008; Nkambule et al., 2016). Furthermore, the limitations of the existing mechanisms for engagement have been noted. It was recognised that better information flows between the clients and eThekwini utilities, such as water and sanitation, are required for the departments to accelerate learning opportunities to meet the service backlog challenges sustainably. Mechanisms for aggregating local knowledge to find innovative solutions to complex and intractable problems, such as infrastructure vandalism, reflect a participatory deficit in service management systems. Among the many reasons provided in the empirical literature, the issue of mainstream participation efforts is driven by conflict mitigation principles. This means that stakeholders who exert substantial influence and are politically active are invited to the discussion platforms to achieve buy-in

from groups most likely to engender conflict. As a result, conflict mitigation takes precedence over other objectives, such as bringing new information and ideas to the discussion platforms or scanning information landscapes for innovative solutions (Lubke, 2004; Matisse, 2013; Bracking & Diga, 2015; Khawula, 2016). This demonstrates the use of instrumental rationality on the part of eThekweni in stakeholder engagement, which aims at dialogue designed to achieve buy-in into its projects and initiatives from the community and other stakeholders (Scholes & Clutterbuck, 1998; Jones et al., 2018; Franklin, 2020). This approach to standard stakeholder participation is biased in that it brings to the fore the most vocal stakeholders who become involved who are deemed to have legitimate and urgent claims, as well as exhibiting political power to cause conflict and hinder or block a given project, at the expense of those who might have essential insights in solutions and problem management (Stringer et al., 2006; Prell et al., 2008; Duze & Reddy, 2020).

2.9. Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the literature on stakeholder engagement within public-sector environmental projects. It addressed important stakeholder identification, communication, analysis, and engagement aspects, emphasising adaptive frameworks that ensure successful project outcomes. It highlighted the challenges within South African contexts, noting that resource constraints and evolving stakeholder roles demand a dynamic approach to engagement. The review drew attention to stakeholder management theories underpinning the study's theoretical framework, such as the Stakeholder Management Umbrella Model. These models show that structured, inclusive frameworks can substantially improve project sustainability and stakeholder relations, where the challenges persist at the Department regarding stakeholder marginalisation and a lack of appropriate channels for feedback. Literature suggests that well-defined communication channels are vital in proactively raising and addressing the concerns of stakeholders to prevent potential conflicts. Moreover, the review pinpointed practices of poor engagement, including delayed responses and lack of transparency, usually lead to the dissatisfaction of stakeholders and, hence, negatively affect the outcome of the projects.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

This section focuses on the methods used in this study to operationalise the theoretical framework, determine the nature of the data and the data collection techniques, and the data analysis and evaluation so that responses can be provided to meet the proposed research objectives. The adopted research philosophy and how it has been implemented in this study are discussed. The qualitative research design, sampling methods, data collection and analysis are explained. The chapter concludes with a discussion on validity and reliability testing and research ethics in undertaking the research study.

3.2. Research philosophy

Interpretivism is the ontological stance adopted for this research; it aims to develop an in-depth understanding of the subjective meanings attached by people to their experiences (Pulla & Carter, 2018). In it, meanings have a status over quantitative measurements because it is not the metrics that define conflicts, it is the framing of issues, leading toward a common understanding of experiences through envisioning solutions (Darby et al., 2019). Within this paradigm, the researcher was interested in the contextual factors that shape the organisation's interactions with various stakeholders through subjective interpretations (Mitchell et al., 2021). Interpretivism allowed this study to examine stakeholders' interactions concerning how individuals in different organisations view interests, stakes, power, and legitimacy (Iandolo et al., 2024). This philosophy formed the basis of the investigation into subtle, qualitative information on stakeholder engagement that allowed for a greater appreciation of how meaning was negotiated and constructed in the planning and execution of the environmental project (Giusepponi, 2023). In this way, research focuses on understanding the social realities of stakeholders instead of depending entirely on objective measures (Brannick & Roche, 2007; Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Other essential research philosophies include Interpretivism, Positivism, Realism, and Pragmatism (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). Positivism assumes that knowledge is objective and can be measured through science, often using quantitative methods (Elías, 2023). Realism is like positivism in that some aspects of positivism ring true, but it acknowledges that human perceptions may colour the reality being studied (Mhango, 2018). This philosophy implies that though a reality independent of human thoughts exists, it is rather complicated to access fully due to subjective interpretations (Van der Walt, 2020). Contrary to this is flexible Pragmatism.

It implies that the research philosophy should be chosen based on the research questions without focusing on any paradigm (O'Shea et al., 2021). Pragmatists adopt qualitative and quantitative approaches to answer practical outcomes (Mensah et al., 2019). Each of these philosophies has a different lens, and Interpretivism is mainly in line with the emphasis of this study, which lies in understanding stakeholder perception and the nuanced subjective nature of their interactions (Yusif & Hafeez-Baig, 2024).

3.3. Constructivist paradigm

The study followed a constructivist paradigm and how people construct meaning about experiences, especially in stakeholder engagement in environmental management (Qi & Ong, 2022). Ontologically, the constructivist paradigm holds that reality is subjective and multiple, constructed through individuals' experiences and interactions; this was central to understanding the diverse stakeholder perspectives in environmental management (Eaton et al., 2021). Epistemologically, knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants; in other words, it emphasises shared understandings while exploring such concepts as "interest," "stake," and "legitimacy" around environmental projects (Reed et al., 2018). Axiologically, this paradigm recognises that research is value-laden; hence, the researcher's and participants' values shape the interpretation, particularly in stakeholder analysis and relational dynamics engagement (Sharpe et al., 2021). Such a theoretical approach, therefore, values the unique perspective that each participant may bring to a study, knowing only that their relations, values, and social contexts frame their view and responses related to environmental management practice over against seeking objective truth (Colvin et al., 2020). This would mean that constructivism allows research to focus on such socially constructed meanings and, hence, find out how realities of different stakeholders' interaction sometimes clash and finally affect decisions and outcomes of environmental projects (Mussehl et al., 2022). It was well suited to capturing the complexity and dynamic nature of stakeholder relations and their interactions in collective action upon environmental initiatives (Kujala et al., 2022).

3.4. Research Design

This study was designed to be a case study, and qualitative data was collected and used (Espín, et al., 2019). This design was selected because of the need to attain an in-depth study of the Department's stakeholder management problems by focusing on the subjective experiences of the stakeholders in various environmental development projects (Burns, 2019). The study used qualitative data on ecological management from multiple projects the Department was engaged in with diverse communities in eThekweni. The objective was to interpret observations to

develop solutions to observed challenges based on the meanings the participants provided during data collection, which will be discussed in the subsequent sections (Holifield & Williams, 2019).

The choice of multiple case studies lies in their ability to produce detailed descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation using constructions to arrange the data and relate the observations to the extant literature (Vohra, 2014). Multiple case studies have also added that they strengthen the results by replicating patterns since the same interviews are undertaken across a spectrum of similar or diverse participants, thus strengthening the robustness of the study outcomes (Bendtsen et al., 2020). Through literal replication, the cases can corroborate with each other, while through theoretical replication, multiple cases can be made to cover diverse hypothetical conditions; this strengthens the analytical premises of the study, providing external validation to the intended research (Vohra, 2014). Thus, the study employed multiple cases where the department interacted with diverse stakeholders and collected qualitative data by interviewing and analysing the collected data to inform the study inquiry (Alencar, Russo, & Kniess, 2020).

3.5. Target Population

The target population was the individuals in the seven environmental management projects: eThembeni Community Care, Burlington Recyclers, Green Cator Manor, Siqalakabusha Environmental Group, Ingcweti Environmental Youth Group; Siyazenzela Conservancy; and Funukwazi Women's Environmental Group. These groups had at least 25 members each with selected leaders, thus yielding a large enough population of participants to be recruited into the study. A significant target population is an advantage since, with qualitative data, there should not be any missing observations, but the information should be collected for analysis to a required depth. A significant target population increases the data collection space. It ensures that the anticipated depth and richness of data are achieved since most of the participants in these projects worked as equal beneficiaries of the projects and were likely to have access to similar information.

3.6. Sampling

A sample is a proportion of participants extracted from a target population for use in a research study, from which a study's findings can be extrapolated (Brannick & Roche, 2007). The study was qualitative and employed non-probability sampling strategies in recruiting participants. The participants selected were the ones who were familiar with the project, what was intended

to be achieved, and its operational status to ensure that the persons chosen could give relevant and informed perspectives. This now falls under the purposive sampling strategy in qualitative research, where participants are specifically selected based on their knowledge, experience, or relationship to the study topic (Ames et al., 2019). This has to do with the very nature of qualitative research, where the emphasis is on the richness of data rather than statistical generalizability (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024). Given the study's engagement with seven cases, this sampling strategy was well executed, where participants' understanding of project-specific dynamics was critical to exploring the nuanced interactions between stakeholders (Jayiya et al., 2022). By selecting participants who could offer relevant and informed insight, the researcher ensured the data collected was relevant and capable of exploring the in-depth nature of stakeholder engagement within environmental management (Obilor & Isaac, 2023).

3.7. Sample Size

A total of 14 participants, composed of individuals from the various stakeholders associated with the seven projects outlined above, were recruited to participate in the study. The seven projects had a stakeholder base of at least 25 participants, and the participants were purposively selected and recruited, with two members chosen from each project group. The numbers were divided equitably across gender dimensions to ensure the participation of both males and females, and they participated in in-depth interviews with the researcher.

3.8. Data Collection Methods

3.8.1. Semi-structured interviews

Data was collected through in-depth interviews with the participants using semi-structured interviews. These interviews were used to collect data from participants' questions on how stakeholders were identified and recruited into the environmental management projects, their perspectives on how their interests were being represented, the communicative systems and the outcomes of their present engagements and future anticipations (Kakilla, 2021). This data was collected through audio recordings and researcher's notes taken during the interviews (Al Balushi, 2018).

Participants were recruited to acquire in-depth knowledge of stakeholder engagement practices within environmental management projects based on the study's qualitative, purposive sampling approach (Bell-Brown et al., 2022). Specifically, this research targeted and recruited respondents through a purposive sampling approach, targeting those playing key roles and directly involved in environmental management projects (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

Priority was given to those with extensive knowledge of project goals, operational phases, and stakeholder dynamics, including key informants such as project managers, stakeholder group representatives, and community leaders, who could provide diverse insights into stakeholder interest management (Bearman, 2019). Organisational gatekeepers supported the recruitment process to facilitate access, with selected participants contacted through formal channels, such as email or phone and face-to-face interactions (Spasić, 2020). Participants were briefed on the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and required commitment before participating in semi-structured interviews (Evans & Lewis, 2018).

3.8.2. Field Notes

Field notes were an important supporting data form in this study (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). These were journaling notes taken by the researcher during the interviews and also included reflections of the researcher on the issues raised in the interviews and the nature of the exchanges concerning some of the problems (Pacheco-Vega, 2019). Field notes were handwritten during each interview and were later analysed and compared with the transcriptions. These were important in documenting some aspects observed directly or alluded to during the interviewing process, thus providing rich insights into the research study (Martínez et al., 2019). Most of the notes jotted down during the interviews were summaries of the main points the participants alluded to and some emerging issues during the interviewing process, which placed the responses in context yet to be directly connected with the research questions. The notes indicated when problems existed in the engagement between the communities and the Department. Other notes included records of observations on the attitude or demeanour of the participants over issues, some issues they expressed with strong voice/emphasis, and direct quotes that attracted the researcher's attention (Goodman et al., 2020). These notes were most important in the discussion section of this research study when the findings were being evaluated (O'Shea et al., 2021).

3.8.3. Document analysis

Most of these documents were brought up in the discussion of the findings, where the reported analysis of the participants was compared with the publications of the Department concerning the progress of environmental projects and working relationships with the recipient communities (Williamson et al., 2019). To this end, Departmental publications such as policy documents, policy briefs, project reports, community engagement reports and IDPs were collected, analysed and incorporated in the research in the discussion of the findings to provide

a balanced perspective of the Department and the participants (stakeholders) (Blackburn et al., 2018).

3.9. Analysis of Data

Data analysis in this study was carried out in several steps to ensure accuracy and consistency in deriving themes from participant responses (Mortelmans, 2019). First, transcripts of interviews conducted in both the English and Zulu languages were transcribed and translated into the English language. This translation allowed participants to express themselves freely in the language of preference (Niedbalski & Ślęzak, 2018). The researcher reviewed the transcripts several times and listened again to compare the audio with the text to resolve discrepancies and ensure authenticity in the responses from the participants (Dalkin et al., 2020).

After verbatim transcription, transcripts were uploaded into NVivo 12, and qualitative data analysis software was used to support and facilitate the organisation and visualisation of data to assist in identifying patterns and themes (Warnes, 2024). Employing a constant comparison method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), the researcher read each transcript against others, ensuring consistency in the emerging categories and their distinctiveness. This strategy is consistent with grounded theory, in which the researcher repeatedly returns to data to refine categories, analogous to quantitative methods such as factor analysis (Maher et al., 2018). This qualitative, interpretive strategy is thus assured of developing theory from data rather than imposing it (Moi et al., 2018).

The main research questions were used to develop codes with separate categories for each. Responses to questions on stakeholder identification in environmental projects, for instance, were coded by characteristics, roles, and stakeholder identification methods. Questions about the analysis of stakeholders were coded based on perceived influence and the process of analysing them (Ominde et al., 2021). Themes related to communication practices included positive and negative interactions. Feedback mechanisms, perceived benefits, and barriers-coded engagement practices. These codes allowed for a systematic data organisation, and as the singular insights were captured, new codes were added (Dalkin et al., 2020). Analysis entailed further refining these codes to establish substantive meaning and develop themes that would make up the findings. The next chapter follows from this coding process, developing themes and building arguments out of the data, but it is rooted in the participants' answers to

achieve deep understanding of stakeholder engagement in environmental management projects (Al-Kindi & Al-Khanjari, 2021).

3.10. Ensuring quality of findings and outcomes.

A research study's conclusions can be credible and of sufficient quality if the findings are based on quality data and data analysis methods. The following aspects were considered during the data collection and analysis to ensure these.

3.10.1. Trustworthiness

3.10.1.1. Credibility

Credibility was established through several strategies in this study that increased the accuracy and authenticity of the findings (Kakar et al., 2023). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to share their experiences and perspectives freely, hence collecting detailed and highly context-specific data on stakeholder engagement in environmental projects (Byram, 2022). To further increase credibility, the researcher engaged in prolonged contact with participants to explore stakeholder dynamics and ensure comprehensiveness in the responses about actual experiences. Another aspect realised in this study was member checking. Allowing participants to review and check their responses ensured accuracy in their views and intentions regarding the study's findings (Amin et al., 2020).

3.10.1.2. Dependability

The study was highly reliable since it followed standard research procedures and documented each step of the process to enable replication and transparency (Kale, 2019). A detailed record of research design, data collection, and analysis procedures was maintained so that in the future, other researchers could trace the approach and methods used in the study (Bakker & Boer, 2021). An audit trail helped capture methodological decisions and adjustments made during the research in response to contextual changes or new insights (Nguyen et al., 2020). This way, the findings were consistent and reliable over time and in similar conditions, further indicating the strength of the study design (Velloso & Tizzoni, 2020).

3.10.1.3. Transferability

Transferability was achieved by providing thick descriptions of the study's context, participant selection criteria, and data collection processes (Stalmeijer et al., 2024). By detailing the setting of the environmental management projects, the roles of participants, and the operational dynamics within the eThekweni Municipality, readers are given sufficient contextual information to assess the applicability of findings to similar situations (Singh et al., 2021). The

study design has allowed other researchers and practitioners to consider the appropriateness of its findings about stakeholder engagement practices on different but similar environmental or community-based projects (Harrison, 2019).

3.10.1.4. Confirmability

The study was confirmable, hence objective and free from researcher bias (Kakar et al., 2023). The researcher took reflective notes to record possible biases, personal reflections, and observations during data collection and analysis (Kyngäs et al., 2019). Through this reflexive practice, the researcher could set apart her views from those of the participants, ensuring findings based on the actual experiences of the latter, not influenced by preconceived notions (Amin et al., 2020). An external audit was also conducted, whereby an independent researcher reviewed the study's methodology and findings to validate the objectivity and neutrality of the results (Byram, 2022). This phase increased the transparency and credibility of this study in that conclusions were made from authentic data that genuinely represented the stakeholders' perceptions (Harrison, 2019).

3.11. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance for this study was sought and obtained first from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HHSSREC) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN). Additional gatekeeper permission was obtained from the case studies to ensure appropriate and ethical access was granted. Steps taken to ensure participant confidentiality included the pseudonymisation of all participants, and all data, which included audio recordings and transcripts, were stored in password-protected files. This was strictly followed by creating a respectful and open interview environment where participants would feel confident responding honestly. The privacy and anonymity of the respondents were respected by not revealing any personal identity and through thorough anonymisation of all identifiable data. Furthermore, ethical integrity was supported throughout data analysis by accurately representing participants' intended meanings, further supported by member-checking, where participants could review and validate their statements. All these considerations ensured the protection of rights for the participants and reduced potential risks while supporting the study's credibility.

3.12. Study's limitations

This study's findings were inherently limited by its focus on seven specific environmental groups collaborating with the Department. Given this concentrated scope, the insights derived

reflected the unique dynamics and interactions within these groups, which may not fully represent the broader experiences of other environmental organizations in the region. The study's design prioritized depth over breadth, allowing for a detailed examination of stakeholder engagement and management practices within these selected groups but limiting the generalizability of the findings to a wider population.

Additionally, the perspectives captured in this study were limited to participants occupying specific roles within their respective groups. This role-based focus was necessary to maintain consistency and relevance in exploring stakeholder interactions, but it may have introduced biases based on the unique responsibilities and viewpoints of these individuals. As a result, the study may not have fully encapsulated the range of experiences or perspectives present within the entire environmental stakeholder community. These limitations underscore the importance of contextualizing the findings within the specific settings of the participating groups and refraining from unwarranted extrapolation to broader contexts.

3.13. Chapter Summary

This chapter has sought to explain the research method to investigate stakeholder views of the community, within environmental groups that work with the Department. Embedded within an interpretivist and constructivist paradigm, the study undertook a qualitative approach, by holding in-depth interviews, supported by field notes. A constant comparison method was used to analyse this qualitative data, allowing for a nuanced understanding of stakeholder dynamics and engagement practices. The methodology was designed to capture the subjective insights of participants, aligning with the study's focus on contextual and experiential data. The chapter also included the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, including procedures to ensure data quality through member-checking and detailed secure handling of the data. Codes extracted from interview responses were combined into themes on which the analysis and discussion in the next chapter were based. Building on this, Chapter 4 will present the findings and thematic interpretations from the coded data, developing an in-depth view of the experiences and challenges involving stakeholder engagement.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION OF DATA ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, an outline of the thematic analysis implemented in this study is discussed, with the specific ways in which it was implemented in creating codes, aggregating codes into constructs, and using constructs in developing themes. These themes, as demonstrated, illustrate the findings from the data analysis. The presentation of findings follows the thematic analysis discussion and the outline of the research objectives.

4.2. Thematic analysis and data analysis

Thematic analysis is generally explained as a method of analysing qualitative data and is usually applied to transcribed text from interviews, audio files and video files. In this method, the researcher examines the data closely to identify common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns that communicate the meaning that emerges from the data and comes up repeatedly (Caulfield, 2019). In the implementation of thematic analysis, a step procedure is generally followed, which entails the researcher engaging in data familiarisation, coding, theme generation, reviewing of themes, defining and naming themes or building constructs and writing up the emerging substantive theories or statements of facts (Caulfield, 2019). Qualitative research aims to gain a more coherent understanding of a phenomenon through the experiences of those who have directly experienced the phenomenon, recognising the value of the participants' unique perspectives, which can only be understood within the context of their experiences and worldview. Analysis then seeks to understand how the emerging data fits the study's premises (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

The reason thematic analysis is presented here and not in the preceding chapter is because of the tendency for findings from a qualitative data analysis to be labelled as results of qualitative research without providing the necessary details concerning how the analysis reduced the data into workable themes and emerging conclusions. As outlined earlier, thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It can be considered a descriptive method that reduces the data flexibly and dovetails with other analysis methods. Thematic analysis in the present case of open-ended transcribed data enabled the exploration of the topic of stakeholder management at a level of depth not possible with quantitative analysis while allowing flexibility and interpretation when analysing the data (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This subjects the method to researcher's bias, mainly when the researcher's skills are not developed enough to perform thematic analysis with the rigour

demanding in its implementation. The findings in this study cannot be said to be free from the peculiar limitations and biases of the researcher.

In summary, the thematic synthesis implemented in this study included free line-to-line coding of the transcribed interviews, comparison of the codes and the organisation of these free codes into related areas to construct descriptive constructs and develop analytical themes (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

4.3. Compiling and familiarisation

Compiling the data into usable form was an essential first step in thematic analysis, with the audio recordings being transcribed to text and the language translated to English. Compiling was the first step the researcher took in becoming familiar with the data; through reading and re-reading the data, the researcher became more familiar with the data and paved the way for in-depth thematic analysis. Since coding examines terms used in the data and their meanings, in familiarising with the data, the researcher acquired a sense of entirety with the data that allowed a greater understanding of phrasing or meanings of terms as used in the responses within their contexts, enabling better coding of the data.

4.4.1. Disassembling—free coding

This stage followed directly from familiarisation and compiling of the data in which the data was broken down or disassembled, creating meaningful groupings with identifiers. Disassembling is called coding, a process by which raw data are gradually converted into usable data by identifying themes, concepts, or ideas that have connections or are related (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). This was first-level coding, in which a general identifier was decided. Then, all factors that fell under that identifier were grouped, preparing for second stage analysis through comparison. Codes or identifiers are attached to units of data varying in size, that is, phrases, sentences or paragraphs, with the codes encompassing a complete thought. As explained in the data analysis in the previous section and consistent with the parameters of thematic analysis, codes can be established before coding begins, which is a priori based on a careful review of prior research. In this study, the theory was used to construct the research questionnaire with the questions used to develop the broad a priori codes (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). The table below shows an example of the coding process.

Table 1: Thematic analysis coding process

Participant Reference	Data Extract	Initial Codes
RP11	We have identified some harmful communication practices where some colleagues may not carry out their responsibilities by disobeying the management plan. A hostile encounter occurred during the Source to the Sea—Good Green Deeds national environmental management campaign, which was drastically postponed because other stakeholders were unaware of it. Stakeholders have restored a sense of ownership of our environment and developed a commitment to it. This has a positive impact on the way the community treats or sustains the environment. Benefits include the gathering of accurate data and a biophysical environment. We also benefit from sustainable projects because people agree with them, and those who don't agree give reasonable reasons. Local sources are priceless sources of information.	Negative communication practices Insubordination Negative communication Project postponement Stakeholders bypassed in communication channels Environmental Ownership Commitment Sustaining the environment Accurate data Biophysical environment Sustainable environmental projects Indigenous Knowledge on environmental management

Source: Author

For instance, a parent identifier, “stakeholder characteristics”, was decided upon, and under this identifier, several characteristics describing stakeholders were grouped, such as “departmental involvement with the grouping; high-end competencies possession; previous experience with particular groupings; shared goals and objectives and specialised areas of focus”. These parent groupings or categories formed the basis of further comparison grouping

to ensure that after assembling and disassembling the remaining groupings, they would communicate the central ideas obtained through textual comparison, looking for similarities in patterns, terms, and communicated ideas. This process ensured that the findings from the data emerged from the data through disassembling it.

4.4.2. Disassembling or generating themes from the data.

In this data analysis stage, themes are generated by identifying patterns among the codes created and grouping similar codes into thematic groups to develop themes. This was achieved by comparing the content and text within the codes created and assembling similar ones (Caulfield, 2019). Thus, the codes were put into context to create themes, with the themes capturing essential ideas concerning the research questions and representing some level of meaning within the data set. An example of integrating initial coding with disassembling is given in the table below, where the arrows show how codes are placed in larger groupings to form themes which form the basis for the written substantive theory or statements of findings.

Table 2: Example of initial coding integration

Participant Reference	Data Extract	Initial Codes	Disassembling or generating themes
11	We have identified some harmful communication practices where some colleagues may not carry out their responsibilities by disobeying the management plan. A hostile encounter was during the Source to the Sea – Good Green Deeds national environmental management campaign, which was drastically postponed due to other stakeholders being unaware of the campaign. Stakeholders have restored a sense of ownership towards our environment and have also developed a commitment towards the environment. It also has a positive impact on the way the community treat the environment or sustains the environment.	Negative communication practices Insubordination Negative communication Project postponement Stakeholders bypassed in communication channels Environmental Ownership Commitment Sustaining environment Accurate data Biophysical environment Sustainable environmental projects	Negative communication Disruptions of stakeholder meetings and other ways of negative feedback Poor communication hampering stakeholder participation. the

	Benefits include the gathering of accurate data and a bio-physical environment. We also get benefits by getting sustainable projects because people agree with the projects, and those who don't agree give reasonable reasons. Local sources are priceless sources of information.	Indigenous Knowledge on environmental management	Better environmental project outcomes Better local community awareness of environmental upkeep Better local community awareness of environmental upkeep Important information is communicated at forums.
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Source: Author

This stage was also combined with a review of the outcomes themes to see if they aligned with or formed an accurate representation of the qualitative data. This was accomplished by comparing the themes with the data, which was very important given that in the generation of codes, sometimes an interpretation is put in the data in the sense that new terminology is brought to best summarise an idea emerging from the data. Therefore, this comparison of the themes with the data helped to assess if the terminology did not result in the themes detracting from the original ideas communicated in the data. Since there was no scope in the present research for the development of a new theory through gravitating thematic analysis towards formal grounded theory analysis, there was no basis for seeking theoretical saturation as the main concern was to examine the breadth of understanding of stakeholder management methods as the various groups interacted with the Department (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Caulfield, 2019).

4.4.3. Reassembling and writing

The codes and categories of each concept were mapped and then put in context with each other to create themes. Each theme captures something important about the data about the research

objectives and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018). Themes take numerous pieces of related code to illustrate the bigger picture of what is being portrayed by the data. These themes formed the foundation for the written interpretations of the data as presented in this study under each specified objective.

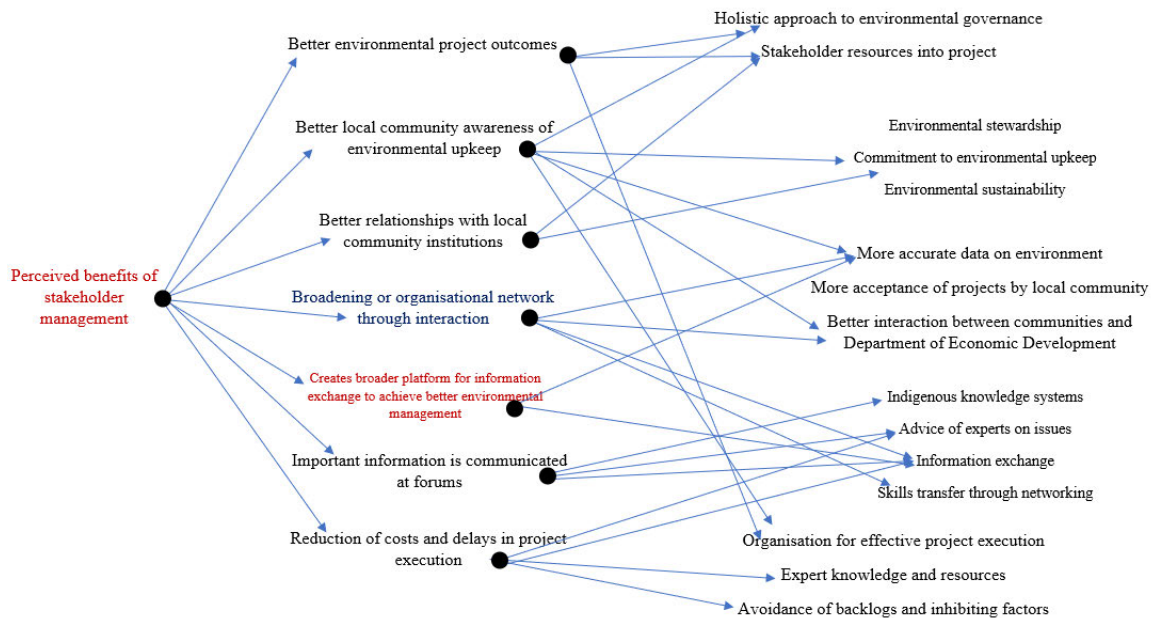


Figure 3: Reassembling and writing of themes

Source: Own construct from data analysis

In the hierarchical illustration of thematic integration, codes were aggregated into sub-themes and then sub-themes into main themes aligned with the broader research questions and objectives. Writing was based on broader themes and sub-themes. The higher codes provided the researcher with a view across the broad thematic landscape of the data. More detailed codes and sub-themes enabled the researcher to examine fine distinctions across data instances.

4.4.4. Interpreting and presenting analytical conclusions

This final stage is necessary because while data analysis provides patterns of understanding the structure and pattern of meaning in the data, the findings thus arrived at do not speak for themselves but require an interpretive voice for the findings to be communicated within a meaningful context (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Caulfield, 2019). In this stage of the written work, the researcher, in line with the theoretical premises of thematic analysis, made analytical conclusions from the data presented as codes and then themes in light of the questions and objectives of the study. While presented at this stage in a unilinear fashion, interpretation has occurred throughout the study, as the data was being disassembled and reassembled, with notes

and emerging concepts being written down and integrated into the analytical writing. To be valid, the researcher ensured that the analytical conclusions were complete, with such findings demonstrating the beginning, middle and end of how such interpretations of the data were drawn. This is illustrated and explained more in the section on the presentation of research findings below.

4.4. Presentation of the findings

The findings from the data analysis are presented here in the order of the study's objectives. Against each objective, an illustrative summary is presented, followed by substantive writing based on the interpretation of the findings and the supporting evidence of extracts from the analysis.

4.4.1. Objective 1: To provide an understanding of stakeholder identification practices currently being implemented in the Departmental Projects.

4.4.1.1. Identification based on the environmental project at hand

Stakeholders were reported to be identified based on the environmental projects undertaken by the Department at that time. There were also notions of stakeholder identification being perceived as an ongoing process in which certain people were brought to the table as they were affected by environmental disasters. One participant noted that “observation of the existing work of the stakeholders on the environment was also a practice in which formal engagement could then be established between the Department and those grassroots stakeholders” (RP02). It was also reported that stakeholders were identified through interaction and training with some organisations, such as discussing waste disposal with creche supervisors, environmental greening, water conservation and environmental maintenance with schools and various methods of avoiding environmental contamination. This was noted by various participants who noted,

We select our stakeholders based on the challenges we have on that particular project and the service we will need (RP08).

Stakeholder identification is an ongoing process. We meet certain people because they are affected by environmental disasters (RP11).

We first see what they are doing; then, because everything in this world is the environment, we talk to them about the environment. Some of them are Creche

supervisors; we speak to them about not throwing away disposal nappies carelessly. Other stakeholders are schools; we speak to them about making vegetable gardens and recycling, promoting water savings and educating them on what to do if a burst pipe exists. For instance, we educate the students and school staff on making sure the water does not stay in one place. They should allow it to run to avoid environmental contamination (RP02).

Thus, through these interactions, the expected carrying out of the issues discussed makes those involved stakeholders in the Department. However, these interactions could be more formal. In most cases, the responsibility was left to the various organisations with infrequent engagement and follow-up with stakeholders, thus identifying no likely viable stakeholders for continued engagement. Participants also expressed that those partnerships and collaborations were “avenues through which stakeholders were identified, such as projects on environmental health and environmental support programmes, in which case the nature of the ecological project was instrumental in directing who can be brought in as the best stakeholder” (RP07). This does, however, seem to ignore the notion of the interconnected nature of environmental projects that an environmental health crisis could also be the same as a socioeconomic crisis, such that those stakeholders affected socioeconomically by an environmental health crisis must be integrated and their views heard, their welfare considered. One participant further noted,

We usually work with Environmental Health for environmental workshops and presentations in school. Environmental Affairs supports all environmental programmes, including commemorations of environment calendar days like Wetlands Day and World Enviro Day, celebrated in June every year (RP07).

These findings on stakeholder identification based on environmental projects align with stakeholder management theory, which emphasizes dynamic and inclusive stakeholder engagement. According to stakeholder theory, effective identification and engagement require consideration of all stakeholders who influence or are influenced by the project (Cobb & Elder, 2012). This is in line with the observations from the study on identifying stakeholders dynamically, such as grassroots interactions and training initiatives. The literature highlights the fact that stakeholder engagement fosters better alignment between project goals and diverse stakeholder interests, reducing potential conflicts (Franklin, 2020; Butt et al., 2021).

More importantly, though, this step of stakeholder identification at every point aligns with adaptive stakeholder frameworks put forward in literature, stressing more fluid and evolving

stakeholder roles over time (Dalton, 2019). Similarly, integrating the observations from stakeholders and grassroots contributions reflect an inclusive stakeholder identification model through which capturing diverse interests can be carried out to reflect better project outcomes (Park & Lee, 2015). While practical, the informal engagements resonate with calls for formalised frameworks to avoid inconsistencies and assure sustainable collaboration (Krick et al., 2005). The theoretical underpinning highlighted the need for systematic stakeholder partnerships where robust identification processes were in place to ensure that inclusiveness in facilitating meaningful contributions from stakeholders within the varying socio-economic contexts of the community was congruent with the overarching goals of environmental project sustainability.

4.4.1.2. *Individuals and groups with environmental interest*

The findings revealed that individuals and groups in their various organising structures were identified in the departmental projects based on expressed environmental interest. Thus, the identification process based on expressed environmental interest included individuals and groups connected with ecological management with an expressed environmental recovery plan, whose environmental conservation interest was aligned with the Departmental goals and groups with an expressed joint mandate in environmental interest.

The findings also emphasised that various individuals and groups were involved in environmental management programmes such as environmental protection and conservation, which were identified from multiple spheres of government. Thus, there was a focus on individuals and groups involved in environmental management, which could be minimally focused on stakeholder identification, given that most environmental management projects undertaken by independent stakeholders needed to be loaded with economic incentives to encourage broader participation. Thus, there was limited participation due to the absence of other economic incentives. Participants further expressed,

These are all sorts of environmental management, be it environmental protection and conservation, identified from all spheres of the government and the general community (RP05).

We then refer to the relevant Department, which could provide us with those necessary resources. We identify stakeholders on the problem that needs to be solved (RP08).

Stakeholder identification by role was also identified, in which people who were directly or indirectly interested in environmental projects were identified whose roles included

participating in decision-making processes and aggregating for ecological justice and equity (RP06). These stakeholders with interest in environmental projects aggregate and must align with the Department's key performance areas (RP14). A comparison of these methods of stakeholder identification with existing challenges in stakeholder engagement in which the issues of limited knowledge resources resulted in dependence on very few stakeholders with competencies and knowledge resources who tended to influence project direction and outcomes. Furthermore, requiring that identified stakeholders align their key performance areas with the Department could be some form of coercing stakeholders into relations of control and co-option. Participants echoed,

Stakeholders are affected, whether directly or indirectly or people who are interested in environmental projects. Their roles include participating in decision-making to improve environmental justice, equity and operation (RP06).

These stakeholders that are interested in a particular project pull together the project needs to align with their Department's key performance areas (RP14).

Identifying stakeholders based on the criterion of environmental interest most closely aligned with stakeholder theory since the latter emphasized diverse interests and collaborative approaches toward successful projects. According to stakeholder theory, individuals or groups with a vested interest in environmental conservation were major stakeholders since their goals were often parallel organisational objectives, fostering better alignment of outcomes (Cobb & Elder, 2012). The study's findings, which focussed on expressed environmental interests and roles in decision-making, aligned with Franklin's (2020) statement that early integration of stakeholder interests can potentially reduce conflicts and increase project sustainability.

The study's finding that stakeholder alignment with departmental goals could sometimes look coercive reflected a broader critique in the literature around top-down approaches to stakeholder engagement. Krick et al. (2005) argue that this could work against stakeholder autonomy and trust, possibly stifling innovation and broader participation. Further, this reliance on the small pool of knowledgeable stakeholders identified through findings points out some challenges identified by Dalton (2019a), in her argument for capacity-building as a requirement for more diversity among stakeholder involvement. The information gleaned supported the idea of structured, inclusive engagement frameworks between departmental objectives and the autonomy of stakeholders, building a foundation that allowed for collaborative partnerships aiming toward equitable, informed solutions concerning environmental sustainability.

4.4.1.3. Groups or individuals with a joint mandate

The Department identified groups with a joint mandate regarding environmental goals and objectives and resolving environmental issues. In the Department, given as an example, departments involved in environmental management are identified as stakeholders. The findings revealed that the Department was also told to identify stakeholders aligned with its mandate, the specialised areas they were involved in, and who were identified in that manner. Two participants noted,

The joint mandate was identified for environmental management and protection of natural resources such as water, air, and soil, which are critical elements against which the Department's environmental management projects are directed. We bear in mind the mandate of the organisation and all interested parties, which can either be individual or groups, but the major interest must be to protect the environment and natural resources like water, air, and soil, which are essential components of environmental management projects (RP10).

Stakeholders are identified as partners with a common mandate in resolving a particular environmental issue, like here in our department in environmental affairs, we identify those departments involved in environmental management. What we usually do is the departmental mandate and key results for sure, and if there are specialised areas that stakeholders are involved in, we do identify them according to that (RP05).

The findings revealed that the stakeholder identification processes by the Department were event or project-centred, with stakeholders being identified. As noted, the Department performed visits to meet with groups with the same interests and exchanged information. However, apart from the Department's identification processes, stakeholders sharing common interests in a project aggregated their interests and came together to implement projects in singular, extensive interactions. Forum meetings were conducted in detail, and those involved came together to make the projects successful. These interactions outside the Department's initiating could be a source of opposing agendas and other conflicts in departmental interests (discussed in section 4.4.4.1). This was expressed by one participant who emphasised,

The stakeholders who have an interest in a specific project normally come together to make the project worthwhile in one large interaction so that we do not work in silos. We have forum meetings to detail what will be done for a theme in the calendar, and all those interested come together to make it a success RP14.

Identification of stakeholders with a shared mandate reflected the application of collaborative principles in stakeholder management theory. Stakeholder theory insists on partnerships between entities with overlapping goals to increase project success and sustainability (Cobb & Elder, 2012). The Department's practice of aligning stakeholders through their mandates, specialized roles, and interests mirrors the approach described by Krick et al. (2005), who claim that aligning mandates creates strategic coherence and resource pooling, particularly in projects addressing shared challenges like environmental protection.

The findings also highlighted project-centered stakeholder aggregation, where groups of common interests joined to execute projects. This was in line with Franklin's (2020) view that stakeholder partnerships increase inclusivity and reduce silos in the execution of projects. However, the rise of opposing agendas during joint initiatives gives rise to the challenges highlighted by Dalton (2019a), who warns that unaligned goals among collaborators may lead to conflicts that hurt the outcomes of a project. As indicated in the findings, the best practices of establishing forums for detailed discussions ensured transparency and provided a medium through which stakeholders could engage in collaborative problem-solving (Park & Lee, 2015). These insights have provided reasons to value structured frameworks of stakeholder collaboration to balance the Department's objectives with varied agendas by external stakeholders for cohesive, effective, and sustainable environmental management.

4.4.1.4. *Environmental forums and war rooms*

Environmental forums have been voiced as another method of stakeholder identification in which forums aggregate stakeholders with a common interest in a particular project to share their perspectives and aggregate their interests. Findings revealed that regular participation in the environmental forum meetings and war rooms also included information exchange sessions with clients and previously identified stakeholders for existing projects. These environmental meetings and war rooms brought together even high-profile stakeholders on ecological tasks such as Wildlife management, glass recycling, and Solid Waste Management. Two participants added,

These war rooms and awareness campaigns are ways to bring more stakeholders into environmental projects. We use Wildlife, Glass Recycling, Economic Development of Tourism and Environmental Office, a recycling and re-use company called Durban Solid Waste (DSW) and especially the war room. The process we use is first to engage

the war room to help us in this particular project, and we managed to get other stakeholders and create awareness campaigns (RP09).

The stakeholder identification process involves the establishment of environmental forums per area here in the Metro, regular participation in the environmental forum meetings and war rooms and conducting information sessions with clients and the previously identified stakeholders for existing projects (RP05).

The environmental forums and war rooms used for stakeholder identification echoed a participative and dynamic approach consonant with stakeholder management theory. Stakeholder theory focuses on creating a platform for cooperation, information exchange, and the confluence of interests toward common ends (Cobb & Elder, 2012). The study's results, where the stakeholder aggregation on specific projects, such as wildlife management and solid waste recycling, were consistent with the position taken by Krick et al. 2005, which stated, "collaborative forums build shared understanding and optimize resources."

Significantly, the high-profile and grassroots stakeholder engagement through war rooms and information sessions is in line with Franklin's (2020) suggestion to bring in diverse stakeholder perspectives to increase the project's scope and impact. Such forums will open spaces for frequent interactions where stakeholders can hammer out project-specific challenges and identify synergies in environmental management. Moreover, it aligns with best practices for stakeholder engagement since Dalton (2019b) remarks that public outreach activities are instrumental in bringing on board new stakeholders to continuing projects. These observations underline the role of structured, inclusive platforms such as environmental forums and war rooms in stakeholder identification, fostering collaboration, and building networks that would enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the ecological projects.

4.4.1.5. Absence of formal stakeholder identification

Other stakeholders, however, pointed out that there were no formal stakeholder identification processes between them and the Department, alluding to the fact that people interested in environmental management were identified and invited to a meeting to develop ecological activities during the meeting. One participant noted,

No formal process is available; we normally identify people interested in the environmental management and sit with them and then come up with environmental activities to be done (RP10).

In their interaction with the Department, other stakeholders indicated that there needed to be formal stakeholder identification since they were engaged in environmental work and presented themselves to the Department seeking assistance. The community participants selected some environmental projects and implemented them. The Department interacted and collaborated with them when such projects aligned with the Department's portfolio in any given area. In these cases, it could be expected that such independent stakeholders had a plan mapped out and a project completion timeline with specific objectives and present conflict when the Department came in with new information and mapping concerning the project and even new schedules and timelines. Participants further noted,

We were doing voluntary work as squatter settlements women's organisation where we were doing environmental work such as cleaning the streams and rivers and picking out invasive alien plants (RP03).

We started the planning and rolled out our awareness campaign, and we did get information on how to run this campaign (RP09).

Findings revealed that an internal stakeholder at the Department who was also connected with one of the environmental groups and was interviewed alluded to the experience of stakeholders visiting the offices at the Department and presenting communications on potential environmental projects or sometimes the Department contacted stakeholders through various media, informing them about projects they intended to communicate. The Department needed a better-coordinated stakeholder identification system that was ad-hoc, case-dependent, and based on the convenient inclusion of stakeholders. Participants noted,

In other cases, stakeholders come to our offices and inform us about the environmental projects they want to start. Sometimes, we phone stakeholders and describe environmental projects we want to conduct with them (RP10).

Stakeholders are not identified at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs. Depending on their availability, all stakeholders come together in a planning meeting to manage a project; most often, these stakeholders were identified many years ago, and every year, it's by default that the stakeholders make themselves available (RP14).

The lack of formal stakeholder identification processes, as evidenced in the findings, highlighted some serious gaps in systematic stakeholder management and aligned with

critiques in the literature of ad hoc approaches to engagement. Stakeholder theory emphasizes structured, transparent processes for identifying, including, and managing stakeholders to ensure a fair process and alignment with organizational objectives (Cobb & Elder, 2012). These findings, then describing the stakeholders as self-presenting or being identified opportunistically, pointed toward a need for pro-active engagement frameworks. This supports Krick et al.'s (2005) assertion that poorly defined processes can limit inclusivity and impede strategic collaboration.

This reliance on previously identified stakeholders and informal modes of engagement could ossify and limit the range of stakeholders, as Dalton (2019b) noted in the risks of relying too heavily on historical relationships. Further, the pains in reconciling timelines and objectives at departmental levels with independently initiated environmental projects underlined the requirement for clear frameworks for integrating external initiatives, something that Franklin (2020) pointed out as a key factor in reducing conflicts and improving the results of projects. These insights underlined the need for dynamic and formalized stakeholder identification systems that would enhance inclusivity, diversify stakeholder participation, and establish a better match between independently initiated projects and departmental objectives to foster more sustainable environmental management practices.

4.4.2. Objective 2: To assess the effectiveness and limitations of the existing practices in stakeholder analysis, information systems and engagement processes.

The data analysis revealed that the effectiveness and limitations of the reported stakeholder analysis, information systems and engagement could be considered from several perspectives, focusing mainly on stakeholder characteristics, reported stakeholder roles and problems with existing engagement practices.

4.4.2.1. *Stakeholder characteristics*

The stakeholder analysis strategies were reflected in the various ways the stakeholders were characterised and grouped, influencing how the Department engaged with the stakeholders and thus characterised and categorised. The multiple characteristics reflected grouping based on the group's involvement with the Department, whether the group had high-end competencies functional to the projects at hand, based on previous experience with groups, whether they shared common goals and objectives with the Department, whether they held specific areas of focus and finally their relevance to the Department's present projects. These categorisations are illustrated in the figure below.

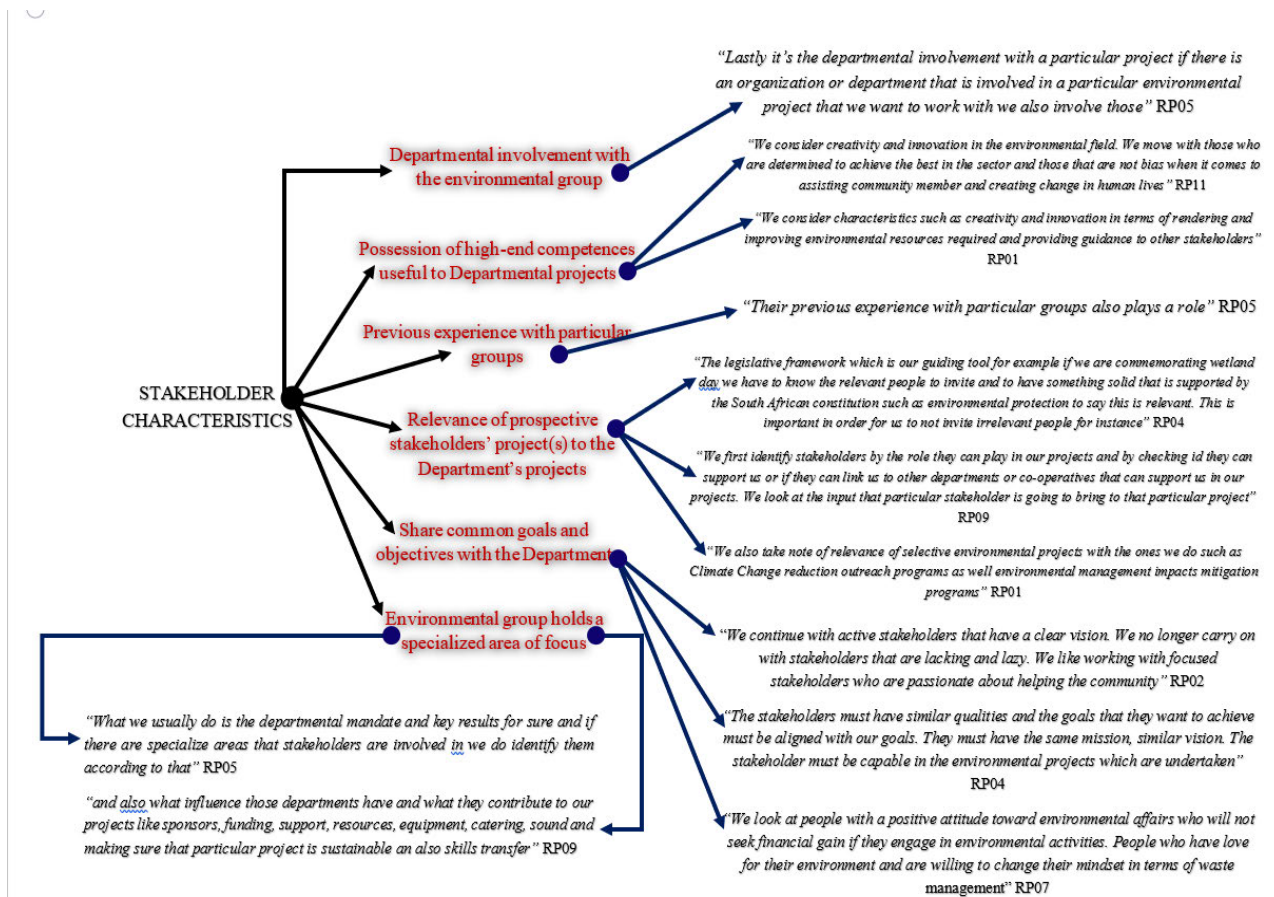


Figure 4: Stakeholder characteristics

Source: Own construct from data analysis

Departmental involvement with environmental group: The data showed that among the attributes considered in the analysis of stakeholders by the Department was whether the groups were involved in any environmental project that was in line with current projects the Department was working on. This reflected a limited view of stakeholder analysis since other attributes were considered for groups assessed to have projects that aligned with the Department's projects. One participant noted that "the Department believes in previous experiences working with environmental groups" (RP05).

High-end competencies functional to the project: In the discussion of stakeholder engagement challenges, it was seen that the Department was riddled with critical skills shortages, making it vulnerable to the influence of stakeholders with either material or human resources (section 4.4.4.1). This challenge can be seen as the result of stakeholder analysis, which considers whether groups that transact with the Department have high-end competencies, such as creativity, innovation, or design (RP11). These stakeholders with high-end competencies such as creativity and innovation are given leverage to lead and guide other

stakeholders in managing environmental projects, thus giving them influence over the project, its aspects and outcomes (RP01).

Relevance of prospective stakeholders' project(s) to the Department's project: The attribute of significance seems to imply that stakeholders who were incorporated into the Department's projects had some relevance based on contributions they could bring to the project's undertaking (RP04). This seems accomplished by inviting stakeholders who can play relevant roles in the project and offer support for project success, focusing on the input, resources, competencies, and other key attributes the stakeholders can bring to that project (RP09). Some environmental projects that can be considered include climate change and ecological management mitigation projects (RP01).

The legislative framework is our guiding tool. For example, if we commemorate Wetland Day, we have to know the relevant people to invite and have something solid supported by the South African constitution, such as environmental protection, to say this is relevant. We need not invite irrelevant people, for instance (RP04).

We first identify stakeholders by the role they can play in our projects and by checking if they can support us or connect us to other Departments or Cooperatives that can support us in our projects (RP09).

We also take note of the relevance of selective environmental projects with the ones we do such as Climate Change reduction outreach programmes as well as environmental management impact mitigation projects (RP01).

Relevance is defined here as the centrality of prospective stakeholders' issues to departmental projects through a focused approach following the stakeholder management theoretical tenet that argues for strategic selection of stakeholders who show promise of contribution toward the success of a project. This resonates with extant literature identifying stakeholders relevant to the organization by applying their resources, expertise, or networks to further organization objectives and work towards fruitful collaboration and optimization (Cobb & Elder, 2012). The findings of this study, which underline the use of legislative frameworks and role-specific invitations, align with Krick et al.'s (2005) assertion that structured criteria for stakeholder inclusion raise the relevance and outcomes of a project.

The clear priority placed on specific contributions from stakeholders, such as advocacy for climate change outreach or ecological management mitigation, was in line with Franklin's

(2020) assertion that stakeholder buy-in to project goals ensures strategic coherence and economises resources. The rationale for the deliberate identification of stakeholders, based on a potential to support or to connect the Department with more resources or collaborators, fell under best practices for project network enhancement and influenced maximisation (Dalton, 2019a). These insights illustrated the criticality of a structured and relevance-based approach to stakeholder inclusion, ensuring that contributions were meaningful and strategically aligned with departmental goals to drive impactful and sustainable environmental initiatives.

Share common goals and objectives: The Department, in its projects, is concerned with community welfare and development to provide economic opportunities and social welfare improvements (Department, 2021). Stakeholder analysis in line with this attribute considered stakeholders active in environmental management and concerned with improving their local community welfare and development (RP02; RP06). The stakeholders should share qualities with the Department, have a similar mission and vision aligned with the Department's goal, and demonstrate the capacity to run environmental projects (RP04; RP07). Participants echoed,

We continue with active stakeholders that have a clear vision. We no longer carry on with stakeholders who are lacking and lazy. We like working with focused stakeholders passionate about helping the community (RP02).

The stakeholders must have similar qualities, and the goals that they want to achieve must be aligned with our goals. They must have the same mission and a similar vision. The stakeholder must be capable in the environmental projects undertaken (RP04).

We look at the interest in environmental issues and activities, people who genuinely love environmental issues. We also look at people who participate (RP06).

We look at people with a positive attitude toward environmental affairs who will not seek financial gain if they engage in environmental activities. People who love their environment and are willing to change their mindset regarding waste management (RP07).

Building up stakeholder capacity can be financially intensive since it takes technical skilling and capacitating to have such capacity to undertake projects. Project sustainability requires the existence of incentives for participating groups, with the requirement for stakeholders not seeking financial incentives potentially disincentivising the participation of a more comprehensive array of stakeholders (RP07). Shared interests, objectives, mission and vision

with the Department might imply that only those are considered stakeholders who might not exhibit agendas diverging from the Department's agenda, with those potentially left out of the engagement being potential sources of conflict in the long-term (RP12). The findings also showed that there was some level of coalition and engagement among stakeholders outside the Departmental influence, caused by the similarity of interests in massive interactions to prevent working in silos. Aligning such alliances with the Department's interests and goals seems to provide a vast platform for garnering support for the Department's environmental projects (RP14). Participants further emphasised,

We firstly consider similarity to the project; they must participate in similar projects. We also check attitude towards the environment (RP12).

The stakeholders who have an interest in a specific project normally come together to make the project worthwhile in one large interaction so that we do not work in silos. Those stakeholders interested in a particular project pull together, and the project needs to align with their Department's Key Performance Areas. If they have a common goal, have ready material or presentations and are available and allowed to join RP14.

The emphasis on the stakeholders having shared goals and objectives with the Department gave a strategic approach that stakeholder management theory highlights, which is a collaboration with those individuals or groups whose mission and capacities align with organizational goals. Stakeholder theory backs this practice, reasoning that shared vision and objectives will result in trust, fewer conflicts, and a greater likelihood of project success (Cobb & Elder, 2012). These findings, which underline the participation of stakeholders passionate about environmental issues whose goals are congruent with those of the Department, align with Krick et al.'s (2005) assertion that stakeholders with shared values and capacities are critical to ensuring project sustainability.

The focus on attitude, motivation, and capacity in stakeholder selection reflects Franklin's (2020) counsel to engage those stakeholders who show commitment to the outcomes of a project and minimize risks from those with misaligned or inactive participants. This also brings out potential limitations, such as disincentivizing broader participation by excluding stakeholders with diverging agendas or those requiring financial incentives. This resonates with Dalton (2019a) in that too-selective engagement might overlook valuable contributions and possibly open up more risks for long-term conflict. It highlights the importance of balancing

the goal-oriented aspect with the inclusive capacity-building aspects, to gain a strong and collaborative stakeholder network that can help in sustainable environmental management.

Specialised areas of focus: Similar to possessing high-end competencies in environmental management, specialised areas present another area where the Department relies on stakeholders with competent specialities. Stakeholders were identified and analysed based on whether they possessed specialised environmental management expertise (RP05). These speciality areas of focus in environmental project management can be through sponsorships, funding, another form of support, provision of equipment and ensuring that particular projects were sustainable and that there was requisite skills transfer to ensure environmental projects were undertaken successfully (RP09). Participants noted,

What we usually do is the departmental mandate and key results for sure, and if there are specialised areas that stakeholders are involved in, we do identify them according to that (RP05).

and also, what influence those departments have and what they contribute to our projects like sponsors, funding, support, resources, equipment, catering, sound and making sure that particular project is sustainable and also skills transfer (RP09).

This aligns with stakeholder management theory to leverage stakeholder competencies in increasing project outcomes. Stakeholder theory implies that expertise and resources are among the critical elements in identifying and engaging stakeholders, as they help directly in the sustainability of the project and its guaranteed success (Cobb & Elder, 2012). The Department relied on stakeholders possessing specialized knowledge or those who could provide essential resources such as money, equipment, or transferable skills, corroborating with Krick et al's. (2005) argument that stakeholders with high-value competencies were indispensable when managing complex projects.

Moreover, the focus on skills transfer aligns with Franklin's (2020) assertion that stakeholder partnerships should provide capacity-building to make the interventions sustainable in the long term. This increased the success of environmental projects in the short term and built capacity in both the Department and its partners for future initiatives. However, such an exclusive approach might also bring challenges in the process. As Dalton (2019b) has observed, dependence on a narrow group of stakeholders could create a series of potential conflicts due to asymmetrical resource allocations. Those insights confirmed the requirement to integrate the stakeholders with specialized knowledge in a balanced way within the participation to avoid

the risks of overdependence and resource-driven tensions that could jeopardize the continuity of environmental actions.

4.5. Reported Stakeholder roles

4.5.1. Awareness Campaigns

Stakeholder analysis also classified stakeholders by roles or tasks in the Department's various environmental projects. General stakeholders who needed particular competencies, high-end resources or leverage were primarily involved in campaigns and awareness programmes. To this end, multiple NGOs undertaking social work were incorporated, as well as Creche supervisors and educators at schools who could raise awareness of environmental issues. Religious groups and other stakeholders, including NGOs, civil society and community members, were raising awareness of general ecological problems such as water conservation and waste recycling (RP02). General stakeholders identified as those with no significant influence but who could undertake projects that required mass awareness were recruited into environmental projects that did not require higher-end skills or resources (RP01).

NGOs like Qoqisizwe for Senior Citizens, Gracelands Old Age Home and KwaNdengezi Association for Creches are some of the NGOs we work closely with. Creche supervisors must educate the children on how to help keep the environment clean. We also work with Life Orientation teachers because they teach environmental issues in schools (RP02).

Religious groups are some of the people we work closely with. Other stakeholders include NPOs, Civil Society and Sports. eThembeni Community Care Centre also does awareness programmes like Save Water, Environment groups and Recycling (RP02).

Water and sanitation are important resources for water projects. The same stakeholders assist during the commemoration of the National Water Day as an environmental calendar day, whereby all stakeholders gather to bring awareness to communities and schools about the significance of preserving water as part of environmental sustainability initiatives (RP01).

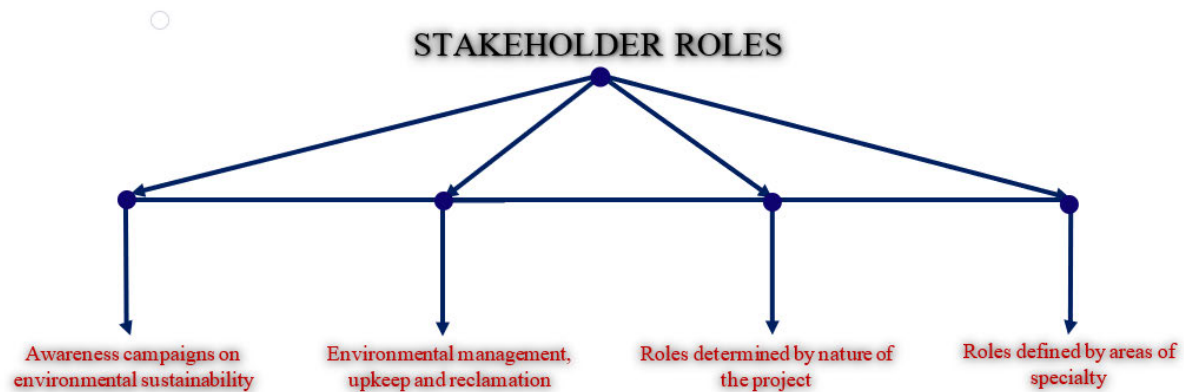


Figure 5: Stakeholder Roles

Source: Own construct from data analysis

Thus, the Department's stakeholder identification and analysis processes considered stakeholders' power dynamics and influence in allocating tasks and roles and their diverse attributes. Furthermore, while characteristics could overlap, there seemed to be a relatively restricted overlap in the roles and functions that stakeholders were assigned in the various projects undertaken by the Department.

4.5.2. Environmental management, upkeep and reclamation

Stakeholders with competencies were included in projects as leaders and assigned responsibility for running some environmental management projects undertaken by the Department. For instance, in ecological clean-up campaigns, these stakeholders planned the carrying out and logistics of the projects and integrated the community to undertake local-level task implementation. In one project, Durban Solid Waste (DSW) was reported to have been assigned an environmental cleaning project in which DSW provided resources and leadership for performing the task (RP08). These assigned leaders also recruited and incorporated other stakeholders in ecological projects, such as the community, NGOs and other organised environmental groups (RP02). Stakeholders at that level thus demonstrated managerial proficiency and were participants in the decision-making processes of the Department in undertaking its projects (RP06). Participants further noted

We had an environmental clean-up campaign, and we worked hand in hand with the community to clean up the dump site; we also worked with the Durban Solid Waste, who supplied us with refuse bags and brought along some of their staff who helped us collect waste (RP08).

Roles for stakeholders include clean-up campaigns such as road clean-ups; this is where we encourage people to collect recyclable objects like paper, cans and glass. We also identify stakeholders by other activities they do in the community, such as NGOs dealing with the youth or senior citizens. We involve them because there is much to do involving the environments (RP02).

Their roles include participating in the decision-making process, to improve environmental justice, equity and operation (RP06).

Furthermore, stakeholders with environmental management proficiency undertook roles connected with the fulfilment of tasks and coordinating activities among stakeholders tasked with leading various ecological projects and giving environmental management guidance at both local and national levels. It was observable that the project's role rested with less powerful, general stakeholders within the various communities, such as local society groups, women and other people seeking to undertake environmental projects to improve their community welfare (RP10). The fact that local community stakeholders undertook most ecological projects, which the Department then integrated into its broader projects with objectives quite different and diverse considerations than those of the local communities, seemed to be the source of conflicts with diverse outcomes for both parties involved (RP10; RP12). Participants further emphasised,

Their major roles include ensuring that the project's main intention is fulfilled, and other departments work together to protect the environment and further give ways for environmental management from the local to the national level (RP10).

On cycling projects, we use Collect a Can as the stakeholders to whom we send all our recyclables. Community-women collect cans and bottles in tuck shops and along the streams to keep the environment beautiful (RP10).

Our project Funukwazi project development mainly deals with gardens and cleaning of rivers and the removal of dumping areas (RP12).

These findings on the role of stakeholders in environmental management, upkeep, and reclamation were consistent with stakeholder theory, which advocates for collaborative engagement of competent actors in realizing project goals (Cobb & Elder, 2012). For example, engaging skilled stakeholders like DSW in clean-up campaigns reflected the application of the principle of leveraging stakeholder competencies to improve how the project was implemented,

as discussed in the literature. As such, stakeholder engagement in decision-making, as Franklin (2020) argued, is a means of ensuring accountability and guaranteeing project sustainability, a principle seen in the reliance of the Department on DSW to lead the initiatives on waste management (RP08).

Equally, the involvement of local community groups in tasks related to ecology depicts grassroots participation in environmental management. On that note, Dalton (2019a) emphasized the need for community-based stakeholders in the development of local ownership and sustainability of ecological projects. On the contrary, this also raised challenges to align departmental goals and objectives with community-driven works, where there were often contrasting priorities. (RP10; RP12). This agrees with Krick et al. (2005), who reason that the non-harmonized interests of stakeholders gives birth to conflicts, and integrative frameworks are necessary to manage diverse agendas effectively. Generally, these practices depict a combination of technical expertise with grassroots participation in achieving a balance between operational efficiency and community welfare within environmental management.

4.6. The nature of the project determines roles.

The data analysis also showed that roles resulted from the projects being at hand. Some agencies connected with the Department worked as resource providers and mentors to train environmental groups (RP03). Other groups actively trained stakeholders in water conservation, waste management and ecological greening projects (RP04). Local stakeholders demonstrated to actively take up various projects supporting the departmental initiatives in most cases without incentives but because of the need for livelihood welfare. In contrast, the departmental projects were directed towards City development and recreation (RP04). The nature of the environmental projects determined the stakeholders to be recruited to undertake the project (RP01).

DSW provided plastic bags for us during the clean-up campaigns. eThekweni Municipality played a role in providing training for us. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is another stakeholder we worked with; they provided seedlings and training (RP03).

There is the Department of Water and Sanitation; their role is to ensure that water is evenly distributed and to train the public to care for and not waste water. Durban Solid Waste for eThekweni Municipality is responsible for all waste management issues in the city. Parks and Recreation is responsible for greening (RP04).

Stakeholders, specifically on Environmental Projects, depended on the nature of the Natural Resource Management and environmental outreach projects being undertaken. Food and Trees for Africa was also a key stakeholder during the Greening of schools, churches, cemeteries and communities as part of environmental initiatives to reduce carbon emissions and fight against Climate Change. Participants expanded,

We also take note of the relevance of selective environmental projects with the ones we do, such as Climate Change reduction outreach programmes and environmental management impacts mitigation programmes. While the nature of environmental projects determines the stakeholders integrated into the projects, some characteristics seem apparent in the stakeholder analysis that allocates such roles and tasks. The Department, in its approach, appears to identify local community projects. It brings stakeholders to direct and undertake the management of such projects and introduce new goals, such as greening initiatives, reducing carbon emissions, and fighting against climate change (RP01).

These findings, which state that the nature of the project determined stakeholder roles, aligned with stakeholder management theory, that underlines the importance of tailoring stakeholder engagement to a project's particular needs and objectives. According to Franklin (2020), practical stakeholder analysis involves matching the expertise and resources of stakeholders to the project's demand, which was done exemplarily by the Department's recruitment of specialized agencies involved in waste management, such as DSW and the Department of Agriculture for the supply of seedlings and training (RP03; RP04).

The adaptive integration of stakeholders into diverse projects, such as climate change outreach and ecological greening, highlighted the dynamic approach to resource allocation and role assignment within the Department. This agrees with Dalton's (2019a) view that stakeholder roles should reflect the technical and operational demands of environmental projects so that they are effective and aligned with goals. Community-based stakeholders were included, even without incentives, pointing to a grass-roots commitment to environmental welfare, although the Department's broader developmental goals may have introduced new objectives that risk diverging from local priorities (RP01; RP04). Taken together, the findings underline the matching of stakeholder roles to project requirements, combining specialized expertise with local participation, in a way that increased the likelihood of better project outcomes and

supported sustainability initiatives, including responding effectively to challenges arising from climate change.

4.7. Roles defined by areas of specialisation

Areas of specialisation have been an attribute that was used in determining stakeholder analysis directed at the categorisation of higher-end stakeholders who took roles as leaders in mandates such as addressing air pollution and waste, education, environmental operations and energy and water management. These agencies that form higher-end stakeholders were composed of skilled communities providing knowledge and guidance and deemed to have a broader understanding of environmental issues than local groups who used local knowledge systems and expected goals in environmental management and planning (RP05; RP14). Participants noted,

Their roles encompass tackling issues from their departmental perspective as determined in their key results areas, for example, ATEA pollution and waste, DSW education, and DSW operation. They all work towards waste minimisation and disposal from different approaches, meaning they have different key results areas but work towards the same goals (RP05).

These are stakeholders in the different departments of the Municipality, Power and Water Utilities, Non-Profit organisations, Botanic Gardens, Department of Education (RP14).

The stakeholder roles identified as specialist areas showed the principles of stakeholder management, using technical expertise and contribution in distinct roles to facilitate a successful project. For instance, specialized stakeholders were best manifested through departments addressing air pollution control, waste management, and education. This is well reflected within the assertion of Krick et al. (2005), whereby a high-end stakeholder not only brings knowledge but more structured guidance to the effectiveness of any environmental undertaking.

This collaboration among specialised stakeholders, each having distinct key result areas, waste minimisation for DSW, and education efforts by the other departments, exemplified the kind of multidisciplinary coordination that Franklin (2020) advises is necessary when addressing complex environmental problems. Those findings, however, expose a specific contrast between such stakeholders' general technical knowledge and localised knowledge held by community groups, echoing a concern expressed by Dalton (2019b) when noting that such strategies may

come apart in addressing grassroots realities. With this integration of specialized and community-based stakeholders, the Department increased its capacity to deal with diverse environmental issues using a balanced approach that combined technical proficiency with local relevance to achieve sustainable outcomes in ecological planning and management.

4.8. Problems with existing engagement practices

Stakeholder analysis methods have been demonstrated to lead to stakeholder engagement problems in three areas: stakeholder engagement being directed towards Departmental ends, not value-free; engagement that was too internally focused, mainly driven by instrumental rationality; and engagement that was focused on the Department's focus areas and informed by different motivations and objectives. Internal stakeholders to the Department, who were interviewed as part of environmental groups, noted that the relevance of ecological projects was juxtaposed against projects undertaken by the Department and aligned with the Department's planning and scheduling (RP01). One participant highlighted,

We also take note of the relevance of selective environmental projects with the ones we do such as Climate Change reduction outreach programmes as well as environmental management impacts mitigation programmes (RP01).

Engagement was solely the responsibility of the environment project leaders, who did stakeholder identification and analysis in alignment with the Department's goals and objectives (RP01). The consequent engagement was directed at ensuring that only environmental groups that would not likely enter into conflicting situations with the Department were considered by considering the groups' vision, mission, and ecological goals and ensuring that these were aligned with those of the Department (RP01). A participant noted,

As Environmental Projects leaders, we consider a lot when identifying stakeholders, which include the goals of that particular Organization. We also prioritise environmental upliftment before anything. We further check the vision and mission of that public or private entity to avoid conflict of ideas later on (RP01).

Finally, engagement was directed towards stakeholders identified as competent to undertake projects that the Department could undertake cost-effectively or required vast amounts of labour. Thus, the analysis considered stakeholders who could meet the departmental needs but needed help finding ways to engage and incorporate the views and perspectives of the local groups in environmental management (RP05). This was echoed by one participant,

Stakeholder engagement has been very beneficial in our work. For instance, creating signages is one reason we engage these stakeholders, especially when we want to integrate our work into other aspects of environmental management (RP05).

These findings on problems with existing practice showed a mismatch with stakeholder management theory, which highlighted inclusive and value-free engagement in pursuit of balanced and sustainable outcomes. In focusing on those stakeholders whose goals aligned with departmental objectives, the Department was exercising what Cobb and Elder (2012) describe as instrumental rationality, where the ends of the Department take precedence over broader stakeholder inclusion. This internally driven approach, however practical to address immediate project needs, risks alienating local groups with divergent motivations or points of view.

With no ability to address cost or labour-intensive projects, dependency practically increased benefits through targeted engagement, an aspect Franklin (2020) noted in leveraging external expertise to optimize resources. At the same time, co-creation principles were missed because local perspectives were overlooked in the process, despite what Krick et al. (2005) point out concerning integrating all stakeholder views for their value in fostering mutual trust and collaboration. The Department's approach risked conflict and reduced community buy-in by narrowly focusing on stakeholders that were aligned with departmental goals. Realigning the practice of engagement with the inclusive principles of stakeholder theory would ensure that technical and community contributions were balanced, guaranteeing equitable, effective environmental management addressing departmental and local priorities.

4.8.1. Objective 3: To determine the effective stakeholder communication practices in the Department which may improve the prevailing challenges.

In stating this objective, the assumption was made that there were problems in stakeholder engagement stemming primarily from the communication practices of the Department, in which the stakeholders employed less conventional communication models in feedback directed to influence the strategies of the Department. Thus, problems such as protests for services and sabotaging environmental projects were feedback mechanisms of differences between the Department's projects and the community perspectives (Roberts & O'Donoghue, 2013). To this end, the focus of the analysis was on three (3) key aspects of communication that emerged from the study: Communication practices, Feedback mechanisms and positive or negative communication. These findings are presented in turn.

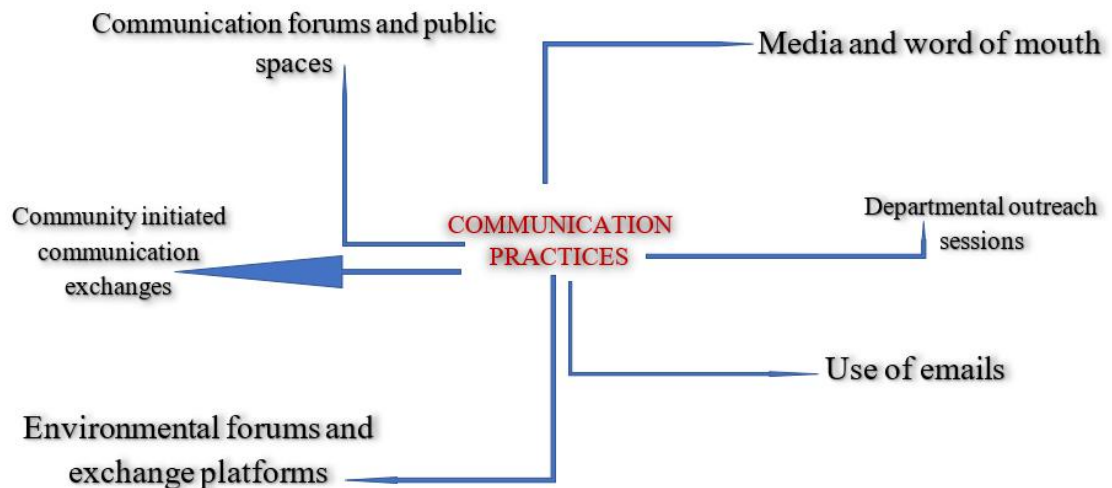


Figure 6: Communication Practices

Source: Own construct from data analysis

The data showed six forms of communication models that constituted communication practices between the Department and its stakeholders and these were: Communication through community forums and public spaces (RP, 01; 02; 07; 08; 10; 11), Community initiated communication (RP, 01; 02; 07), Environmental forums and exchange platforms (RP, 01; 02; 06), Media and word of mouth (RP, 04; 08; 09; 12), Departmental outreach sessions (RP, 01; 09; 10; 11) and through the Departmental emailing system (RP, 03; 04; 06; 10; 12; 14).

4.9. Community forums and public spaces

In reaching the communities, community forums initiated through invitations sent via emails and telephone calls were reported to be the most excellent form of mass communication (RP08); community committees were instrumental in information relaying (RP11). The Department used influential leaders and individuals within the communities to distribute departmental communications and train community-level stakeholders on environmental aspects such as education, climate change awareness and waste management (RP11). Platforms for the Department to communicate its projects to the local community stakeholders were also forums where stakeholders met and interacted, shared reports on their projects, and assisted each other (RP02). Participants highlighted,

The biggest communication method that we use is still the Operation Sukuma Sakhe; we usually write e-mails to them as reminders and call them (RP08).

Political Ward Councillor is the main stakeholder to source training for the community on major environmental aspects like Environmental Education, Climate Change awareness, and Waste Management. We also use community committees to pass through significant information (RP11).

We have things like Operation Sukuma Sakhe, where all stakeholders meet, give reports, and help each other. We communicate through Ward Committees to convey environmental messages and Portfolio Committees to seek hidden stakeholders and use Operation Sukuma Sakhe (RP02).

Community participants and local stakeholders also used these platforms to interact and discuss issues affecting their communities and the various initiatives that could be taken to resolve these issues (RP07). This was quite an interesting point since most stakeholders in the local community were discussed earlier and seen to organise various environmental projects designed to achieve some welfare-improving aspect of their local communities. According to the community-level stakeholders, forum meetings were also crucial since they aggregated their ideas and discussed projects to be implemented at these meetings, and different stakeholders with different ideas also came together (RP01; RP10).

We use platforms like Operation Sukuma Sakhe, a medium we use to interact with stakeholders and discuss issues affecting the community (RP07).

Meetings are also important because we sit down and discuss projects to be implemented. Forums are platforms where stakeholders and people with different skills share ideas (RP10).

As most stakeholders do, we use community wards for environmental management presentations; Operation Sukuma Sakhe monthly meetings to meet with other stakeholders and community representatives conducting environmental projects. Through community and educational workshops, we communicate with youth, women and all community practitioners on environmental matters such as Climate Change and environmental preservation (RP01).

The community forums and public spaces for stakeholder engagement were a direct reflection of stakeholder management theory, which gives a lot of importance to inclusiveness and participative platforms for communication and collaboration. Platforms like Operation Sukuma Sakhe enabled the Department to share information, pool ideas from stakeholders, and enabled

collaboration, reflecting Franklin (2020) in their call for interactive spaces of meaningful engagement and mutual learning. Similarly, this reliance on community-based influencers and committees to deliver information and coordinate training with them mirrors Krick et al.'s (2005) assertion that the grassroots communication among the stakeholders and effective grassroots mobilisation demanded local leadership. Again, this brings together divergent ideas and creates interaction among diverse stakeholders at the forum, conforming to the co-creation principles, which, according to Dalton (2019b), are essential in co-coordinating the diverging contributions of stakeholders toward coherent purposes. However, whereas these forums provide an excellent communication and collaboration, they may exclude those stakeholders who cannot access formal meetings or structured forums. Such limitations could be addressed through broader outreach activities, ensuring more significant equity in participation. All in all, community forums and public spaces provide critical tools for engaging local stakeholders, creating shared understanding, and developing environmental programmes consistent with the goals of the community and the department.

4.10. Use of email and other communication media

These were forums where community stakeholders gathered to initiate various concerns associated with community development. They were forums that aggregated indigenous knowledge towards addressing community environmental problems and developing inborn solutions and ways to seek external assistance (RP03; RP01). Communication media and processes took the form of telephone calls and email messages for appointments (RP03); social media and WhatsApp groups were also instant communication media for fast message relaying, which explained the ease of public gatherings (Rahmawati & Agustina, 2023).

We use telephone, media, e-mails and WhatsApp groups. We use technology; we communicate via e-mails quickly and conveniently via WhatsApp groups. We also use the media space as it can reach the masses (RP04).

We also sometimes use pamphlets; we put these on boards. We also use word of mouth and platforms like WhatsApp and post some information on our media pages (RP08).

We use telephone calls, e-mailing, visiting and making appointments. We usually use the media and word of mouth sometimes to identify relevant potential stakeholders (RP12).

The use of email and other communication media for stakeholder engagement reflected the theoretical emphasis of stakeholder management on effective and inclusive communication

strategies that connected diverse stakeholder groups. The adoption of digital tools such as email, social media, and WhatsApp corresponded with Franklin's (2020) recommendation of using contemporary communication platforms to make the organisation more accessible and responsive to ensure adequate information dissemination and mobilisation of stakeholders.

These communication channels, along with the traditional methods of pamphlets and word-of-mouth, provided a multi-faceted approach to stakeholder engagement. This agreed with what Krick et al. (2005) stated regarding using diverse means of communication to reach stakeholders across different socio-economic and technological divides. It furthered the aggregation of indigenous knowledge by these media, which affirmed Dalton's (2019b) assertion, arguing that integrating local knowledge into environmental initiatives fostered community ownership and tailored solutions. The Department was guided by ensuring the use of technology, adding to traditional outreach methods, bringing flexibility, inclusivity, and efficiency for its engagement to strengthen existing connections, and facilitating collaborative problems in dealing with better outcomes for the environment. However, increasing access to these tools for underrepresented groups could further increase equity and participation.

4.10.1. Community-initiated communication practices

Community stakeholders demonstrated organising groups around various environmental projects and undertakings. Some of these organic groups were ward communities for broader community engagement, forums for addressing community issues, environmental issues such as water issues, control of alien/invasive plants, and youth ecological awareness programmes (RP02). There were also observed to be meetings where progress concerning issues lodged with various local government departments was reported and future strategies considered (RP07; RP01).

We also have Ward communities; these are people hired to participate in such things. We meet once a month, plus there is a secretary and convener. We meet once a month to discuss all things related to the environment. We discuss water issues and alien plants. There is also a forum for the youth where they make environmental awareness (RP02).

Face-to-face sessions are mostly with those coming to our offices for emergency consultations, maybe on illegal waste dumpings in their wards and information sharing sessions with local community members on new developments and ongoing projects

within their environments like collection of recyclables and clean up campaigns to be done (RP01).

The community sometimes report illegal dumping, so we communicate with relevant people responsible for such reporting (RP07).

The communities were also encouraged to undertake diverse projects to establish the various projects they executed in their communities. On these monthly meetings for feedback and communication, workshops were employed for community and stakeholder training on various environmental issues, such as clean-up projects and monitoring and assessing ecological project progress (RP11). The more organised these environmental groups were, the more they established teams that marketed their projects (RP09). Community outreach programmes were instrumented in meeting the communication needs of those stakeholders who could not be reached through internet-based platforms such as email, with environmental events explicitly used for mass awareness (RP10). Thus, most stakeholder groups demonstrated substantial organisation and coordination with much support from the local communities through their established diverse communication channels. Furthermore, participants highlighted,

We communicate through presentations and workshops during environmental clean-up projects; we also use community outreach sessions to monitor and assess environmental projects (RP11).

Community outreach visits are used to reach communities without email access. Environmental events like the Water Day celebration and other celebrations are used to tell the community members about environmental issues to be addressed, such as pollution problems. During activities such as the Wetland Day commemoration, stakeholders communicate what must be known about environmental management projects (RP10).

Outreach sessions encourage environmental project representatives to cascade information about environmental management projects such as adopting environmental spots for the benefits of creating parks and gardening projects for the communities (RP01).

With such elaborate planning and organisation at grassroots levels, there was potential for conflict when new models of external communication needed to align with established communication protocols. Furthermore, when feedback towards requests submitted on specific

environmental issues were lodged, the communities potentially congregated for discussions on possible courses of action. This could also be seen in the fact that the local community groups employed strategies to meet the diverse needs of their disparate groups and integrate such differences in their planning and meetings (RP06).

We use different communication strategies for different audiences because strategies need to adapt to the audience's specific needs; for example, we use formal meetings or open days where the project will take place. Sometimes, we use one-on-ones. When we engage with the community, we use meetings (RP06).

Environmental seminars and campaigns to promote environmental awareness programmes and community forums to get community views on environmental challenges they encounter and need resolutions on (RP01).

The findings on community-initiated communication practices aligned with stakeholder management theory's call for participatory and adaptive engagement methods. When addressing environmental issues such as water management or invasive species control, communities organised into groups and forums to exhibit grass-roots leadership and ownership. This agreed with the assertion by Krick et al. (2005), stating that well-structured local groups enhanced project sustainability by fostering community-driven solutions.

Face-to-face meetings, workshops, and outreach sessions ensured inclusivity for stakeholders without access to digital communication, such as email. This also aligned with Dalton's (2019b) call for using diverse communication strategies to handle the varying needs of stakeholders and ensure equal participation. Moreover, the monthly meetings' feedback sessions and group discussions supported Franklin's (2020) view that ongoing dialogue helps develop trust and fosters transparency in stakeholder relationships. While these were the strengths, the findings also flagged potential conflicts between established community protocols and new external communication models, highlighting the need to align departmental strategies with grassroots practices to minimize disruption. Community-initiated communication practices generally exemplified strong, adaptive frameworks that incorporated diverse stakeholder voices for collective action in enhancing environmental projects.

4.4.3.4. Feedback Mechanisms

The effectiveness of the communication models was also assessed from the available feedback mechanisms and the perceptions towards these, as reported by the participants from the various

environmental groups. The data analysis revealed five reported feedback mechanisms: the use of evaluation sheets, open discussions in stakeholder meetings, open dialogues, project evaluation assessments and the use of suggestion boxes to collect feedback. Among the participants, the most frequently reported feedback mechanisms in order of importance were open discussions in stakeholder meetings, evaluation sheets and project evaluation assessments, as shown in the table below.

Table 3: Feedback mechanisms

FEEDBACK MECHANISMS	EXTRACTS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS
OPEN DISCUSSIONS IN STAKEHOLDER MEETINGS	“We usually get feedback from meetings after a certain project where we discuss the negatives and positives so that we can fix whatever needs to be fixed for future projects” RP08. “We get feedback via meetings on how we have to improve in areas where we are lacking. We also get new stakeholders through the same way” RP11. “We usually connect in conferences where we share ideas and strategies with the municipality and other Government departments” RP02. “We make appointments with organisations and discuss environmental projects done” RP03. “We normally get feedback via War Rooms, where discussions about all community projects are held. All stakeholders meet there for planning and briefing of ongoing sessions” RP01.

EVALUATION SHEETS	“We make evaluation sheets which help us determine stakeholder engagement” RP02. “We get feedback using report writing whether in the form of e-mails or other means” RP04. “We also get letters of complaints from stakeholders demanding rectification of mistakes on certain environmental projects, especially projects with many stakeholders where one organisational failure affects the whole team” RP10. “We also receive feedback by distributing evaluation sheets after completion of environmental projects, but most participants, as you know, are not reliable, but we ensure that we address all their complaints” RP01.
PROJECT EVALUATION ASSESSMENTS	“Before engaging in those projects, we make evaluation forms where at the end of the project, we give those evaluation forms to those involved in the implementation. This allows us to get information from the evaluation forms that stakeholders give. Client feedback is given to other stakeholders, who convey the information to us” RP05. “We call and send e-mails to get feedback from stakeholders we work with. We have evaluation

	forms to hand out if our working environment allows” RP08.
	“We receive certificates of appreciation as feedback for good environmental work done” RP10.
OPEN DIALOGUES	“When we engage physically, we get that immediate oral feedback” RP05. “Unfortunately, we only get feedback if we take the initiative to call the stakeholders” RP12.
USE OF SUGGESTION BOXES TO COLLECT FEEDBACK	“We also have a suggestion box at the entrance of our offices and environmental sites where all community members are free to express their concerns regarding our environmental work, and they do that anonymously” RP01.

Source: Author

The various mechanisms used to obtain feedback on the performance and the acceptance of the environmental projects undertaken in the different geographies of the participating stakeholders suggested that these were obtained depending on the specific context of the stakeholders. Thus, the findings showed a reasonable degree of diversity of feedback mechanisms employed, which were chosen based on whether the mechanism was the one that could yield the best results in feedback between the Department and the stakeholders. Post-project evaluation meetings were reported as the primary means of input between the environmental groups, the Department and other stakeholders, at which meetings issues such as negatives and positives of implemented environmental projects were discussed (RP’01;08;14), and areas in need of attention and improvement and introduction of new stakeholders (RP11) as well as exchange of ideas between stakeholders and government departments (RP02). Some of these feedback meetings were reportedly large. They were held

as conference events aggregating diverse stakeholders, including government departments and private institutions, thus yielding broader options and strategies for improving project execution (RP02). Some meetings were more formal follow-up meetings with specific organisations to discuss projects that had been done or were to be carried out (RP03); this seemed to be connected with follow-up on letters submitted to the Department concerning projects that the Department would have undertaken through the agency of these various environmental groups, where complaints were lodged as well as demands for rectification on implementation of environmental projects by third parties (RP10). Meetings were thus seen to be characteristics of broader and more effective platforms for exchanging and reviewing environmental work and exchanging ideas and debates deciding the future projects. However, it was also concluded that since stakeholders represented varied interests and given the nature of the work and how most of the stakeholders were identified by the Department while engaged in various projects, there seemed to be a possibility that discussions on vast platforms of stakeholders presented fruitful ground for breeding of conflicts with multifaceted results.

4.10.2. Evaluation sheets

Evaluation sheets, which examined various aspects of the completed projects, were also used in assessing the performance and the reception of some environmental projects by multiple stakeholders. The environmental groups reported using evaluation sheets to determine stakeholder engagement concerning their projects (RP02). These evaluations were sometimes followed by written reports or letters indicating specific areas that required correction, review or rectification (RP04; RP10).

We also get letters of complaints from stakeholders demanding rectification of mistakes on certain environmental projects, especially projects with many stakeholders where one organisational failure affects the whole team. Meetings and forums are also used for feedback (RP10).

We also receive feedback by distributing evaluation sheets after completion of environmental projects, but most participants, as you know, are not reliable, we ensure that we address all their complaints (RP01).

While evaluations were effective, there had been some reported areas for improvement, such as stakeholder unreliability and probably putting forward complaints about the completed projects that could have been discussed at the earlier stages of the projects, thus resulting in back-and-forth problems (RP01). Connected with evaluation sheets were project evaluation

assessments, which were reported either before project execution or post-project implementation (RP05). These were said to be given for completion by those who had been engaged or involved with the execution of the project as well as external stakeholders, thus giving the Department their evaluation of the project and its perceived benefits (RP05). The project evaluation forms were also conditional on the contextual environment and the nature of the project since external and extenuating circumstances seemed to have been considered in the decision to distribute evaluation forms, which may have meant that the evaluation forms given were not necessarily unconditional (RP08). The Department also handed out certificates of appreciation to the environmental groups for the completion of environmental projects, which served as a recognition of experience in garnering work or managing future projects for the Department or other agencies in the future (RP10). Participants further added,

Before engaging in those projects, we make evaluation forms and at the end of the project, we give those evaluation forms to those involved in the implementation. This allows us to get information from the evaluation forms that stakeholders give. Client feedback is given to other stakeholders, who convey the information to us (RP05).

We call and send e-mails to get feedback from stakeholders we work with. We have evaluation forms to hand out if our working environment allows (RP08).

Evaluation sheets utilized within stakeholder engagement presented a systematic way to help assess project results and point out areas for change according to the thrust in stakeholder management theory that involved continuous feedback and adaptive learning. Distribution of the sheets before and after implementation allowed the stakeholders to give opinions on how the project had been executed and the perceived benefits of such a project. This practice aligned with Krick et al. (2005), where systematic assessment practices are encouraged for accountability and to promote teamwork among multi-stakeholder projects.

The results reveal that although the appraisals were satisfactory, stakeholder unreliability and late complaints minimized their impacts. This agrees with Franklin (2020), who says good stakeholder engagement requires effective feedback mechanisms at all project phases to reduce retrospective disputes. Furthermore, the relationship between appraisal sheets and certificates of appreciation gives credence to the argument by Dalton (2019b) that recognising stakeholders motivates them and creates long-term partnerships. The Department made its assessments relevant and adaptive by tailoring the evaluation practices to the contextual environment and nature of the project. Addressing these challenges through earlier dialogue and improving

reliability in the feedback processes helped strengthen the potential for efficacy in the evaluation sheets to support environmental project goals and stakeholder collaboration.

4.10.3. Open Dialogues and suggestion boxes

Some participants reported recourse to open dialogue with the Department and other stakeholders as more effective in obtaining immediate feedback concerning the projects they were working on (RP05). Given other findings from the interview with the same participant, it seems that open dialogue was part of the diverse mechanisms for obtaining stakeholder feedback, which would then be passed to the Department by the environmental group since the same group also reported using project evaluation sheets (RP05). Open dialoguing and exchange seem adequate but can be problematic if the broader issues of any given project were not well considered since each party was mainly focused on presenting and maintaining its position in the heat of exchange. The Department, through each agency and the environmental group may have sought to market their project while the community stakeholders may be concerned with other outcomes. The findings also showed that feedback could only be obtained if the environmental groups tried to initiate dialogue (RP12). Otherwise, community stakeholders would find other ways of communicating their grievances with implications to the Department's work, as discussed in section 4.4.4.

The use of suggestion boxes at various offices of the Department was reported in the findings, where community members were free to express their opinions and views on the various projects being undertaken in their locations (RP01). However, considering previous data from the interviews with the same stakeholders as presented elsewhere showed that no single environmental group working with the Department employed a feedback-garnering method in a silo but connected it with other mechanisms to meet the diverse needs of the various communities in which they were implementing their projects.

We also have a suggestion box at the entrance of our offices and environmental sites where all community members are free to express their concerns regarding our environmental work, and they do that anonymously (RP01).

Open dialogues and suggestion boxes represented the participatory aspect of stakeholder feedback; hence, being multi-faceted supported the stakeholder management theory that advocated for the inclusiveness of diverse engagement methods. Open dialogues brought about instant feedback, hence opening direct communication between the stakeholders and the

Department. This was consistent with the findings of Krick et al. (2005), who identify interactive mechanisms that help to build trust and address any concerns in real-time.

Suggestion boxes provided an anonymous forum for community members to share their opinions, ensuring that everyone was included, particularly those who might have felt uncomfortable with direct participation. This agrees with Franklin (2020), who says the use of multiple channels of feedback increases participation and captures diverse stakeholder perspectives. The findings equally meant that open dialogues posed challenges, such as possible conflicts arising from the priority of agendas by stakeholders, which, according to Dalton (2019b), can be a barrier to achieving consensus in multi-stakeholder projects. It mirrored an adaptive approach since it integrated open dialogues and suggestion boxes with other feedback mechanisms, such as evaluation sheets, to respond to the complex needs in diverse communities. This could be taken further and made even more effective by ensuring increased coordination between methods and appropriate responses to the broader project issues in dialogues on collaborative environmental management and conflict resolution.

4.11. Recommendations concerning stakeholder communication

The various stakeholders within the environmental groups from which the study participants were recruited also reported multiple ways in which they thought communication between their various organisations and the Department could be improved to make future exchanges with the Department more efficient and effective. The suggestions included better technology support in environmental management and stakeholder communication; improving diversity in stakeholder aggregation; giving consideration to all voices at meetings since views were subjective to those who experienced them; increased stakeholder presence in integrated planning of environmental projects; legal recourse to minimise conflicts and increase participation; recognition of stakeholder work, support and helpful training; revitalising stakeholder engagement forums and timeous communication on the part of the Department could improve stakeholder turnout at meetings.

4.11.1. Technology support

The access to and use of improved technologies was recommended by some stakeholders as providing better opportunities for effective communication and exchange between the stakeholders and the Department (RP02). Recommendations focused on faster technological devices that enabled multimedia communication to be lodged in the province of project leaders in the environmental field during projects to ensure more rapid response and information

exchange (RP02). This was seen as essential in reversing delays and improving decision-making during project execution, enabling multiple perspectives on emerging problems during environmental project work so that decisions could be made with consultation and engagement. Digital technologies were alluded to as the participants argued that there was a need for technologies used in information exchange and for the Department to align with the changing times to enable innovation and creativity in both the execution of projects and managing them (RP01). Recent technological developments enabled cheaper and faster relaying of information and real-time site access, preventing post-project stakeholder complaints and feedback. New technologies were also reported to improve communication and marketing of environmental projects through social media platforms such as Instagram and Skype, which could aggregate diverse groups of stakeholders, improve stakeholder participation in projects, and improve project ownership and conflicts. This was further analysed by the participants,

National Environmental Affairs must support advanced technological methods since we are all in the Fourth Industrial Revolution stage that requires innovative and creative communication devices. As environmentalists, we can also move with the flow. For example, we must promote our environmental work through social media channels like Instagram and Skype (RP01).

Project Leaders must use recent fast communication methods like those involving advanced technological devices in the environmental field to ensure a fast response towards environmental degradation (RP02).

The use of technology in supporting stakeholder engagement aligned with stakeholder management theory, which underscores efficient communication and adaptive methods for collaboration. It was found that advanced digital tools could fast-track and improve the process of information exchange, consultation, and decision-making within project execution. The approach is consistent with Franklin's (2020) recommendation for using technology to support stakeholder interactions to reduce delays in project management.

In addition, using social media platforms such as Instagram and Skype for communication and marketing of the project also agrees with Krick et al.'s (2005) argument that innovative technologies promote inclusiveness by bringing together different stakeholder groups and enhancing participation. Further, the appeal to conform to the Fourth Industrial Revolution places technology at the forefront in fostering creativity and innovation, a key ingredient in solving complex environmental problems (Dalton, 2019b). Integrating leading-edge,

technological devices into the Department would bring improved real-time collaboration, fewer post-project complaints, and more stakeholder ownership. Those devices would make it easier to react dynamically to environmental issues and for stakeholder views to more closely mirror departmental goals. Benefits could be increased through infrastructure and digital literacy among the stakeholders to ensure equity in access and engagement in environmental management across all involved groups.

4.11.2. Equitable representation of interests at meetings

This concern was voiced by a singular group where the representative participant alluded to the fact that while, in most cases, diverse stakeholders were aggregated in a particular environmental project, sometimes their qualitative attributes influenced how their views were taken during the meetings. It was identified earlier that stakeholders with, say, high-end competencies and skills or influence in other ways, such as political influence, tended to steer the project to the exclusion of the views of different stakeholders who may have seen their perspectives not included or marginalised, thus negatively affecting their future participation. To this end, the stakeholders suggested a need to enable equitable consideration of all perspectives brought to bear on any environmental project since the backgrounds and experiences of stakeholders in their various locales were different (RP06). All interests and responses had to be given equal weight and consideration concerning the project, which issues could be the source of future conflicts or reported complaints. One participant added,

Comments from all known interests and affected parties must be addressed in the issues in the response reports whether they are deemed relevant or not (RP06).

The concern for the equitable representation of interests at meetings was at the heart of an essential strand of stakeholder management theory: inclusiveness and fairness in decision processes. This finding supported that stakeholders possessing high competencies or political influence tended to dominate discussions and may have marginalized others, which is supported by the work of Krick et al. (2005), who noted that unequal power dynamics can limit the inclusiveness and long-term success of multi-stakeholder projects.

Such advice with equal weight to each opinion resonates with Franklin (2020), saying that equitable engagement builds trust, promotes diverse participation, and decreases the chance of future conflicts. Given that all the stakeholders brought different backgrounds and experiences, the Department would be able to make its projects more congruent with the needs of varied communities, as Dalton (2019b) observed, balancing influence and ensuring that each voice be

heard. This concern may be addressed by following structured meeting facilitation methods, such as moderated discussions or weighted voting systems. Also, fairness in the process would ensure that response reports reflected all comments from the parties, whether they were perceived to be relevant or not, hence improving stakeholder satisfaction and reinforcing collaborative efforts in environmental management.

4.11.3. Improved stakeholder diversity

The present stakeholder engagement platforms and mechanisms were reported to be marginalizing some groups either due to delimiting those with no access, the physically impaired, or those who could not participate due to social constructs. The stakeholders suggested that communication platforms take into consideration those who could experience marginalisation based on their physical limitations, such that people with disabilities (RP11), must provide interest aggregation across language and other semantic barriers (RP06) and ensure that issues such as discrimination were dealt with (RP10). Thus, according to the stakeholders, existing communication platforms were not inclusive, being riddled with exclusionary approaches towards those with disabilities and those who could not communicate using the dominant language and were discriminatory towards other groups. To this end, there was a need for platforms that enabled the participation of those with disabilities (RP11), provision of translators where diverse stakeholders were brought together and to eliminate discrimination in the identification of stakeholders and the adverse outcomes of racial profiling in organisations such as environmental conservancies and government departments at all levels (RP10). Furthermore, stakeholders' spatial dynamics should be considered, with differences between the two groups being given equal weight (RP10). Participants added,

Improved communication platforms like the provision of settings that cater for people with disabilities must be provided to the environmentalists (RP11).

Language is the most important barrier that needs attention; communication tools should be written in relevant languages, and translators should be provided in meetings to identify potential stakeholders. Stakeholders should always practice good time management and practice punctuality (RP06).

No discrimination must be involved in the identification of stakeholders. Stakeholders must be identified from different racial organisations including environmental conservancies and government departments from the local, provincial to national

levels. Stakeholder Provincial Forum must remember rural and urban communities when they sit and share ideas on environmental management projects (RP10).

The findings on the need for greater stakeholder diversity affirmed the principles of the stakeholder management approach toward more significant equity and representation through inclusion. Reported marginalization of some groups, such as persons with disabilities or those excluded by language barriers, indicated challenges in current communication platforms. This agrees with the argument by Krick et al. (2005) that exclusionary practices could permanently weaken stakeholder collaboration and undermine the success of environmental programmes.

The stakeholder comments added translators, made settings accessible for people with disabilities, and included measures against discrimination; on the surface, it seemed like a reflection of Franklin (2020) calling for adaptive engagement frameworks that would cater to diverse participant needs. Additionally, as stated by Dalton (2019b), stakeholder diversity affords decision-making the potential to incorporate broader perspectives and experiences needed for addressing complex environmental problems. The use of inclusive communication tools, translation services, and active work against discrimination may achieve equitable participation among the diverse stakeholder groups. It ensured good representation of urban and rural stakeholders, including those from marginalized communities, to increase the legitimacy and effectiveness of the projects on environmental management. This was important to develop stakeholder engagement collaboratively, fairly, and sustainably.

4.11.4. Increased stakeholder presence in integrated planning

The Department's environmental projects were typically determined during integrated planning meetings, which communicated the intentions of the various municipal departments in eThekweni Municipality (Nzimakwe & Reddy, 2008). To this end, the stakeholders called for the need for increased integration of stakeholder representation and participation in the integrated planning communities and conventions to ensure that there was an aggregation of their views in the central planning stages of the projects and decisions concerning the nature and the processes associated with the projects (RP02; RP05). Rural communities were reported to be left out and battling and needed stakeholder assistance if environmental welfare was to be checked (RP02). This could be seen to imply that bringing those stakeholders' views into the planning could bring elements into the discussion that tended to be left out because of lack of representation, especially if the concern of the Department was commercial development rather than basic environmental welfare, which rural communities tended to be concerned with.

Positive and improved results required that all stakeholders be brought to the planning tables and their perspectives, interests and challenges tabulated and considered in planning (RP02). This was echoed by the participants, and they added,

We cannot leave integrated year plans; if we have our year plans and do them together as stakeholders, it would be great because we could know what each stakeholder is doing, minimise costs and get to share resources (RP05).

More private stakeholders must assist the battling rural communities to bring back the state of the environment. All segments of stakeholders must be brought on board to see positive results (RP02).

These findings of increased stakeholder presence within integrated planning were aligned with stakeholder management theory, which focuses on an inclusive decision-making process. Such a call for greater inclusion of stakeholder representation at the planning meeting pointed to equitable participation so that all diverse views could be represented, particularly the view of marginalised communities in rural areas. This agrees with Krick et al.'s (2005) assertion that inclusiveness in the planning stage ensures holistic approaches to environmental projects and reduces disparities.

This exclusion of rural stakeholders reflects Franklin's (2020) critique that stakeholder engagement often privileges commercial or urban interests at the expense of welfare concerns important to underserved communities. It is related to bringing diverse stakeholders to the planning table since findings have emphasised that costs would be minimised with resources shared, and challenges faced in rural areas would be addressed appropriately. It confirms Dalton's (2019) opinion that integrated planning ensures that plans remain relevant and sustainable with their perspective accumulated from all the segments. The Department should ensure active participation in all stakeholder groups and private and rural actors for better alignment to both its commercial and welfare goals through resource allocations aimed at addressing environmental inequities by fostering cooperation in efforts made towards sustainability in the setting of both urban and rural locations.

4.11.5. Revitalize stakeholder engagement

The interview data showed that in some geographies, stakeholder forums or platforms for engagement were either dead or not functioning optimally, probably due to poor communication systems between the Department and the stakeholders. According to the stakeholders, there was a need to revitalise the stakeholder forums through organising and

conducting environmental management summits and conferences; these were viewed as potentially having positive effects (RP05). Some stakeholders also proposed that while media was effective as a platform for communication, there was a need for direct visitations and essentially open dialogues between the Department and the stakeholders (RP06). This could be seen to be connected with the same challenges mentioned above that some stakeholders were marginalised by lack of access to modern communication platforms, physical constraints, racial profiling or outright discrimination. Participants further noted,

We can revitalise stakeholder forums and organise and conduct these environmental management summits and conferences. These have positive impacts (RP05).

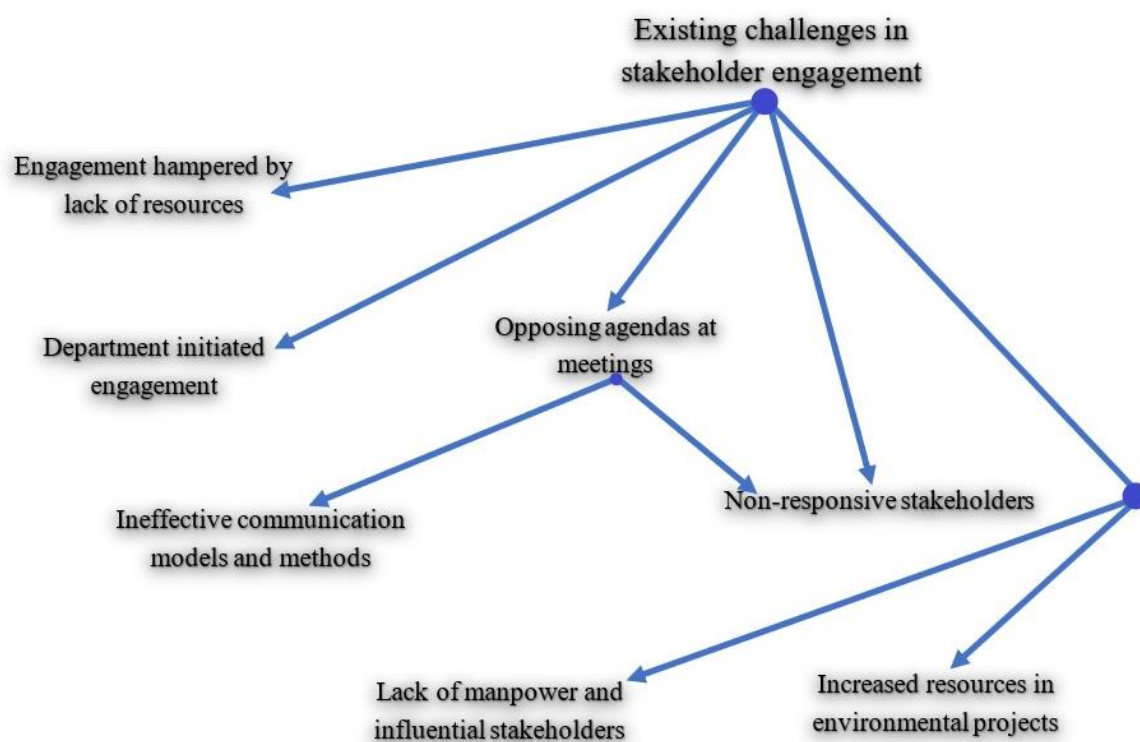
We should not only depend on media or use only that as a medium of communication; direct visitation is also critical (RP06).

The findings on the need to revitalize stakeholder engagement aligned with stakeholder management theory, which emphasizes the importance of maintaining active, inclusive, and functional platforms for collaboration. The reported decline in stakeholder forums due to poor communication reflected challenges identified by Franklin (2020), who stresses the necessity of robust communication systems to sustain engagement and collaboration over time. Stakeholder proposals to revitalize forums through environmental summits and conferences resonated with Krick et al.'s (2005) recommendation for creating structured, interactive platforms that bring stakeholders together to share knowledge and build partnerships. Direct visitations and open dialogues, as emphasized in the findings, addressed barriers to participation, such as marginalization from digital platforms or physical constraints, aligning with Dalton's (2019a) call for adaptive strategies to ensure equitable stakeholder inclusion. Revitalizing stakeholder forums through a combination of digital and in-person engagement methods could rebuild trust, enhance participation, and ensure diverse perspectives were included in environmental management efforts. This approach fostered stronger, more dynamic collaboration between the Department and stakeholders, ultimately supporting the sustainability and effectiveness of environmental initiatives.

4.11.6. Objective 4: To assess the state of stakeholder engagement between the Department and its stakeholders.

4.11.7. Existing challenges

The data analysis showed that in the transactional interaction between the Department and its stakeholders in the various environmental projects, several challenges needed to be improved in positive and beneficial engagement efforts. These identified challenges summarised in the chart below are as follows: engagement seemed to be one way and emanated from the Department, existence of ineffective communication models and methods, lack of staffing within both the Department creating dependence on influential stakeholders, non-responsive stakeholders, opposition agendas that made engagement difficult, provision of increased resources in execution of environmental projects and stakeholder engagement hampered by lack of resources.



Source: Own construct from data analysis

Figure 7: Challenges in Stakeholder engagement

Source: Own construct from data analysis

4.11.8. Department initiated engagement

Interviews with some respondents working directly with the Department indicated clearly that the Department initiated the engagement processes and how transactional interaction occurred (RP08). While the Department had to initiate the engagement process, with broader engagement being much more beneficial in aggregating interests and perspectives, the Department focussed on its needs in the projects and how the stakeholders could assist the Department (RP01). The challenge, particularly noted through comparison with other reported issues, stemmed from the perspective that these meetings were designed to improve stakeholders' acceptance of the Department's environmental initiatives through environmental seminars, campaigns, and guided community forums.

We select our stakeholders based on the challenge that we have on that particular project and the service that we need (RP08).

As most stakeholders do, we use community wards for environmental management presentations. Operation Sukuma Sakhe meetings every month to meet with other stakeholders and community representatives conducting environmental projects, environmental seminars and campaigns to promote environmental awareness programmes and community forums to get community views on environmental challenges they encounter and resolutions on (RP01).

The findings from the Department-initiated engagements reflected a top-down approach to stakeholder interaction and were only partially consistent with stakeholder management theory. The initiation of the engagement ensured coordination and fell within departmental objectives, but an excessive focus on departmental needs risked shutting out broader stakeholder interests. This was indeed consistent with warnings by Krick et al. (2005), who caution that transactional engagement may undermine the mutual collaboration and diversity of perspectives in environmental projects.

Equally, the results brought out challenges in focusing on stakeholder acceptance rather than reciprocal collaboration, which would limit the levels of trust and effectiveness in engagement. Dalton (2019b) highlights the institutional goals and stakeholder empowerment balance in the quest for sustainable and inclusive environmental management. A broader engagement involving two-way communication and integration of stakeholders' perspectives at the project's initiation may be helpful in enhancing collaboration. Addressing community challenges alongside departmental goals would enable the Department to forge better partnerships,

improve project results, and align its environmental initiatives with the broader needs of its stakeholders.

4.11.9. Engagement is hampered by lack of resources

Resources were reported to hamper efforts at stakeholder engagement in various ways, among them multiple deployments of the available municipal staff to other areas, leaving less available workforce to respond to stakeholders when needed. Furthermore, budgetary issues were reported to have imposed a constraint on the ability of the departmental personnel to lobby support for environmental campaigns with stakeholders (RP08). Lack of competent support staff was reported to hamper stakeholders' strength in the environmental organisation, with the problems reportedly exacerbated by lack of workforce, insufficient funds and poor time management towards completion of environmental projects, creating blockages in engagement efforts (RP01). The insight seemed to be that with backlogs on service provision and support for stakeholder efforts, the stakeholders were less inclined to support the Department's new project proposals, thus creating blocks in departmental efforts at engagement.

Other negative influences can be government or municipal stakeholders not showing up due to other commitments and budget issues which restrain them from supporting our campaigns (RP08).

The strength of the environmental organisation to be chosen enables us to execute a project with the necessary resources and expertise to ensure environmental degradation is avoided. Above that, weaknesses such as lack of workforce, insufficient funds and poor time management towards completion of environmental projects create backblocks on stakeholder engagement (RP01).

These findings on how resource constraints impeded engagement pointed out significant challenges in stakeholder management consistent with stakeholder theory, emphasizing the need for support to keep collaboration effective. It resonates with Franklin's (2020) observation that a lack of resources weakens engagement efforts, stakeholder trust, and, by extension, project success. The challenges of poor time management and lack of competent support staff, as evident in the findings, were also underlined by Krick et al. (2005), as incompetent resource allocation results in disengagement from the process and less effective stakeholder participation. This also underpins Dalton's (2019b) assertion that the investment in stakeholder engagement infrastructure is a continuous requirement if long-term relationships are to be forged to underpin collaborations over time. Such resource constraints would remove the major

impediments to engagement through better budgetary allowances, increased workforce availability, and improved time management strategies. The strengthening of resource support would improve stakeholder relations and help consolidate the Department's capacity to implement successful environmental projects, ensuring the long-term sustainability of the initiatives on environmental management.

4.11.10. Opposing agendas at meetings

Opposing agendas at stakeholder meetings were also reported, including such issues as the negative influences of people who held opposing views to various environmental projects and discouraging participating stakeholders from engaging in projects agreed upon during engagement resolutions (RP02). Some opposition also resulted from political differences among influential community-level leaders at such platforms, such as conflicts between community leaders and ward councillors, that effectively blocked all attempts at constructive communication. According to the environmental participants in the study, important information in situations where such conflicts arose needed to be communicated and was noted to have caused project failure. Political influences destroyed project ownership and progress in environmental work between stakeholders and the Department (RP10). Backlogs of previously uncompleted projects were also reported to incursionary issues at meetings, derailing the current meeting agenda. A racial dynamic was introduced into the discussion on agendas, with sabotage in the worst of outcomes due to racial competition (RP12). Some highly influential stakeholders were also reported to hamper engagement at stakeholder meetings as they derailed the meeting agenda from a neutral environmental forum towards politicisation due to the symbols they represented at such engagement meetings (RP01). These have been raised as opposing views hampering progress at the various stakeholder engagement meetings. Participants emphasised,

Sometimes we encounter problems like difficulty connecting with suppliers; sometimes other people discourage the people we work with from recycling all the recyclable products (RP02).

Community wards with leaders like ward councillors sometimes yield negative results because of the power conflict between the community leader and the councillor. It is usually not easy to communicate with them. We also get letters of complaints from stakeholders demanding rectification of mistakes on certain environmental projects,

especially projects with many stakeholders where only one organisational failure affects the whole team (RP10).

Some stakeholders, especially the eThekweni Municipality councillors and certain executive officials, bring political influence right from the beginning of the project. For example, during the commemorations of environmental calendar days like Arbor Day, instead of promoting greening, they turn the whole environmental activity or campaign into politics by wearing certain political organisations' regalia (RP01).

These opposing views were further shown to manifest through direct sabotage and political influence that derailed project focus, particularly at meetings. The data analysis also showed two primary causes of such opposition; while accounting for individual, organisation, partisan and other influences, ineffective communication models and methods were seen to be contributory and the existence of non-responsive stakeholders. The communication model could have been more effective because some stakeholders needed to be aware of an environmental project, resulting in delays due to postponement (RP01). These incidences created in some stakeholders the supposition that they were being left out deliberately from project-related communications.

A negative encounter was during the source to the sea campaign—Good Green Deeds national environmental management campaign was drastically postponed due to other stakeholders being unaware of the campaign (RP01).

The challenges with the communication model were also exacerbated by the reported attitude and behaviour of some stakeholders who needed to follow through with the commitments for engagement. They were reported to deliberately ignore communications, hampering efforts at engagement, while other stakeholders, being engaged in multiple projects, were impossible to reach and update on current developments in other environmental projects. Such stakeholders were also likely to have diverging views on environmental projects, needing to be updated and frequently communicating and were likely to bring external perspectives to other projects, undermining support for methods and efforts in current projects and causing opposition (RP12). The participants expressed,

Negative communication practices include being ignored even if you've made calls and visited the stakeholders. We have other stakeholders who come once after three months because they have many projects that they are dealing with and are hard to get hold of (RP12).

The findings on opposing agendas at stakeholder meetings exposed barriers to reaching consensus and effective collaboration, which were consistent with the focus of stakeholder management theory on the mitigation of conflicts for productive engagement. Political influences, power struggles among leaders, and racial dynamics derailed meetings and environmental initiatives, substantiating Franklin's (2020) critique that unbalanced power dynamics undermine stakeholder cohesion and ownership. The ineffective communication practices noted, including unresponsive stakeholders and lack of awareness about the details of the project, showed systemic issues that increased conflict. This agrees with what Krick et al. (2005) mentioned about transparent and consistent communication in order to avoid misunderstanding and build trust. Moreover, the principle by Dalton (2019b) of structured facilitation and equal participation is relevant here, as dominant stakeholders often politicize agendas, side-tracking constructive dialogue and collaborative objectives. Those would require neutral facilitation, transparent communication strategies, and mechanisms for equitable input from all stakeholders. Better time scheduling and proactive updating could avert delays and miscommunication, hence ensuring inclusivity and trust. These measures could go a long way in reducing opposing agendas and keeping stakeholder meetings focused on advancing environmental projects collaboratively and effectively.

4.11.11. Resource needs for project deployment

Resource needs were seen as a challenge in stakeholder engagement and manifesting through two interconnected ways: lack of workforce and power of influential stakeholders and increased resource consumption in environmental projects. While stakeholder participation was seen to be important in the actual carrying out of ecological projects, in planning such projects and for their long-term sustainability, it was also seen that high-level competencies such as knowledge, creativity and innovation in improving environmental resources were required (RP01). Such individuals with those high competencies were seen to be needed yet were not available, leaving engagement liable to influence the few stakeholders available with those competencies in limited supply. The lack of municipal sector staff members hampered and delayed environmental project deployment, resulting in a negative attitude towards the expected benefits to communities from the proposed environmental projects (RP01).

We consider characteristics such as creativity and innovation in terms of rendering and improving environmental resources required and providing guidance to other stakeholders. More staff members from the municipal sector must be employed to

reduce delays in the execution of environmental projects and for the benefit of our communities (RP01).

The findings on resource needs for project deployment highlighted critical challenges in stakeholder engagement, aligning with stakeholder management theory's emphasis on resource adequacy and equitable contribution. The lack of workforce and reliance on a limited pool of highly competent stakeholders reflects Krick et al.'s (2005) assertion that resource constraints can undermine engagement and project sustainability by overburdening a small group of contributors. The insufficient municipal staff, therefore, as noted in the findings, agrees with Franklin's (2020) criticism that a delay in project deployment resulted from an inadequate resource that can create a defeatist attitude among communities toward proposed environmental initiatives. Moreover, its importance to creativity and innovativeness in improving environmental resources implies Dalton's (2019b) view of stakeholder capacity-building and resource optimization in enhancing the sustainability and impact of ecological projects. Increasing the capacity of the municipal workforce, along with active stakeholder recruitment with specialized competencies, would help in mitigating delays and improve project execution. Moreover, it would enable the development of innovation and training for the current staff and stakeholders to build a more robust resource base that guaranteed the long-term success of environmental projects and foster positive community engagement.

4.12. Recommendations concerning stakeholder engagement practices

The stakeholders who participated in the study proposed areas that needed to be addressed to improve the existing engagement between them and the Department. The recommendations that were made during the interviews were the need for a broader role of stakeholders in the Department programme participation and skills; the need for better management and improved stakeholder engagement practices in planning and execution of environmental projects; departmental plans and working attitude needed alignment with stakeholders' approach to work; early integration of stakeholders in planning and decision making; efforts to increase stakeholder ownership of environmental projects through the Department's support and training; identifying groups carrying out environmental initiatives and equipping them; need for more information exchange between the Department and stakeholders, need for platforms for continued engagement post project completion and support for stakeholder training and funding where necessary. These are discussed under four broad groupings: stakeholder support and training, sustainable engagement, engagement management, and communication for stakeholder engagement, with the sub-themes under each summarised in Figure 10 below.

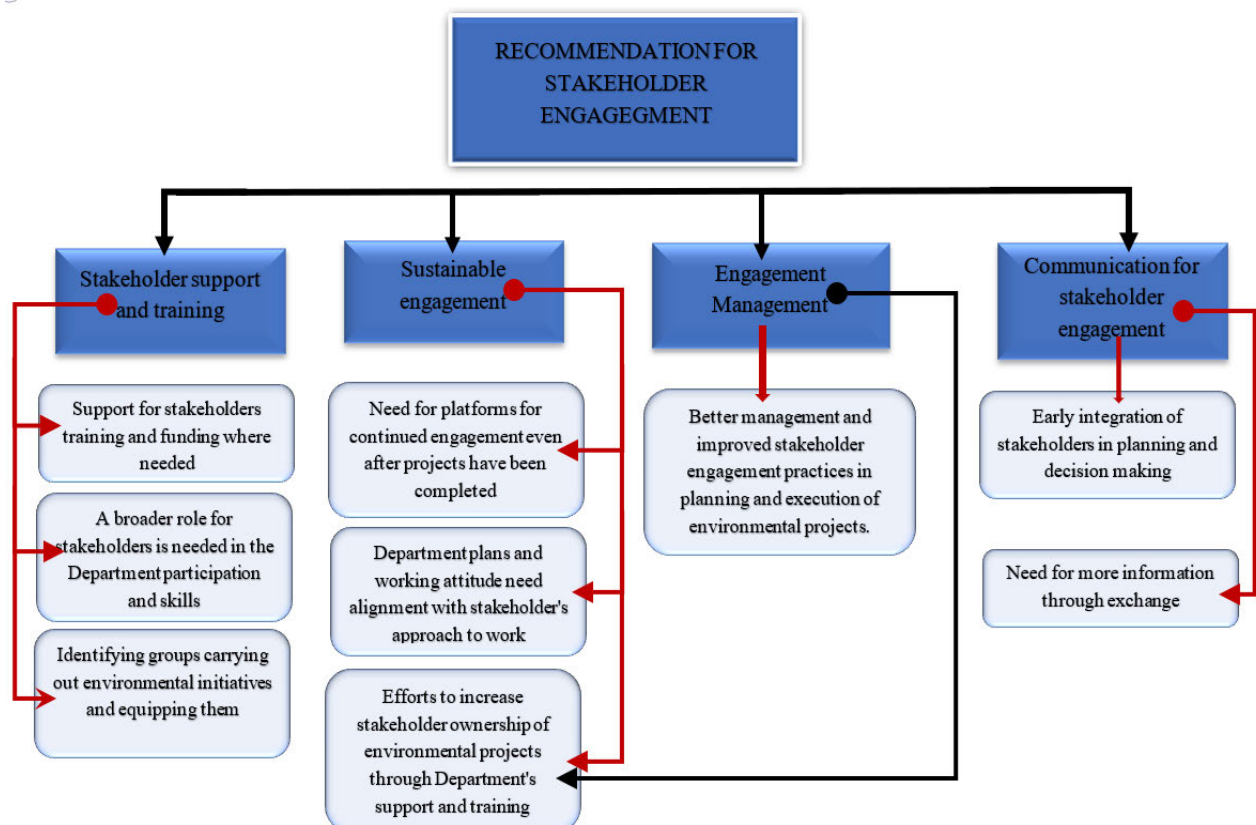


Figure 8: Recommendations for Stakeholder Engagement

Source: Own construct from data analysis

4.12.1. Stakeholder support and training

There was broad consensus among the participants calling for resource support from the Department and other agencies in carrying out their projects inter-alia the Department (RP08; RP02; RP09; RP03). Resources were needed to train identified stakeholders, and according to some stakeholders, this required human resource deployment from the Department to train the stakeholders (RP02; RP03). The training was necessary to develop stakeholder competencies that would significantly aid in environmental projects. It was also observed that the training alluded to as required was at a very elementary stage, such as differentiating between ecological management and agriculture, reflecting a dire need for intervention and training. Such stakeholders, without training, could not maintain a balanced relationship of exchange with the Department that can be instrumental in effective environmental programme outcomes.

We need people to come and train stakeholders and for the government to do follow-ups on training. Stakeholders cannot differentiate between environment and agriculture. We need the government to train people, to train NPOs. We need government officials to engage with the community. Training of identified stakeholders is required (RP02).

The government must come to people and assist the environmental organisation in saving the environment (RP02).

The stakeholders acknowledged the beneficial relationships they maintained with other government agencies involved in some environmental projects, such as DSW, which was reported to have been instrumental in providing the required resources and planned environmental campaigns (RP03). eThekweni Municipality provided training with the other departments providing training and inputs for envisioned programmes (RP03). Participants added,

DSW provided plastic bags for us during the clean-up campaigns. eThekweni Municipality played a role in providing training for us. Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is another stakeholder we worked with; they provided seedlings and training (RP03).

We were identified by the Municipality who later introduced us to a Provincial Department official. Seeing everything we were doing, helped us get equipment, which helped us do a better job (RP03).

According to the stakeholders, consistency was needed across diverse environmental projects, not only those initiated by the Department directly but also all projects undertaken by the stakeholders in various environmental upkeep and maintenance initiatives. There was reported a need for inclusion of stakeholder projects in the government budgetary processes so that resources could be made available as needed and assured. This was viewed as an essential element of the sustainability of environmental projects undertaken by the stakeholders (RP09). The stakeholders also alluded to the need to establish livelihood incentives to encourage the uptake of environmental projects in their areas (RP09). With limited skills and probably low prospects for economic participation, the government, through its budgetary processes and investment, could provide stipends and other resources to assist these stakeholders, thus improving stakeholder participation and project sustainability (RP09; RP10; RP12). The existing government was deemed insufficient, and calls were made for an increased budget to create a broader inclusion of stakeholders possible (RP09; RP10; RP12).

The government should increase the budget and support those sustainable projects. Have an incubation programme for non-sustainable projects and maybe, after a certain period, support by whatever resources they might need, be it equipment, clothing gear, stipends, etc. The government must increase the budget and support all environmental projects I think there is much that the government can do; we would like to see more young people. We would like to see more self-sustainable projects that do not depend on the government and employ young people. The government should play a vital role in ensuring these projects are sustainable (RP09).

More resources like working tools are also lacking while no work can proceed without it. Stakeholders with fewer resources must be supported. Exposure to national and international forums must be reviewed. Visibility of projects to other clients must be improved (RP10).

The need for a broader stakeholder role in environmental planning and management was discussed. According to the stakeholders, there was a need for more capacity building, with the need to develop the skills of individuals on the ground level to promote environmental stewardship (RP11). According to the stakeholders, there were differences in the sustainability of projects based on spatial dynamics, with ecological projects in the rural areas not likely to be sustainable due to a lack of skills and resources among the identified stakeholders. To this

end, calls were made for government assistance and private stakeholders to actively assist embattled communities to improve environmental performance (RP02; RP12).

More capacity must be added to environmental projects to avoid errors in identifying project locations. Individuals at the ground level of environmental management projects must be well-developed to promote environmental stewardship (RP11).

More private stakeholders must assist the battling rural communities to bring back the state of the environment. All segments of stakeholders must be brought on board to see positive results (RP02).

I would like stakeholders to assist our organisation with whatever the organisation might need. It could be marketing or even bookkeeping. We need more conferences to grow in knowledge and systems (RP12).

The findings underlined the capacity-building and resource allocation concern in environmental management; the stakeholder management theory mirrors this with its mantra: empowering stakeholders for shared success. The respondents showed a need for basic training on distinguishing environmental management from agriculture, which only evidenced the critical gap in stakeholder competencies. This corroborates Krick et al. (2005), who emphasize that effective engagement requires developing stakeholders' skills to ensure balanced and productive exchanges.

Such a call for consistent support for all the projects, not just those initiated by the Department, is in line with Franklin's (2020) recommendation of equitable resource allocation for increased sustainability of the projects. The stakeholders' request for the government to budget their activities echoes Dalton's (2019b) assertion that financial stability and predictable support are key to long-term stakeholder engagement and project viability. Furthermore, livelihood incentive, be it in stipends or equipment, are consistent with measures to increase participation and engagement, especially in underserved rural areas where resources were scarcest. The larger budget would allow the Department to close skill gaps, work with more stakeholders, and effect equitable support of environmental programmes. The approach serves as an environmental steward while fostering sustainability and inclusiveness within varied geographic and socio-economic contexts.

4.12.2. Sustainable engagement

In the preceding discussion, the need for training of stakeholders, particularly in the rural areas, and the provision of resources and incentives to improve stakeholder participation and engagement in the various environmental projects were seen as indispensable elements to ensure the resilience of rural ecological projects. Resources, training, and more significant planning and budgeting require more departmental commitment to executing environmental projects.

In addition to these, there was suggested a need for maintenance of dual communication between the Department and its stakeholders, even after projects were closed since completion of the project was one aspect and maintenance another element over the sound horizon of the project (RP08). This can be seen as requisite in exchanging vital information concerning the performance of the completed project and the timeous need for improvements and repairs. The concern for most stakeholders towards environmental project sustainability was directed towards the participation of young people. This could mean that the present demographic engaged in environmental projects in most rural areas was mostly the elderly cohort (RP11; RP09). There are presently no economic incentives influencing young people's participation in environmental projects, with calls for government funding and resource provision to influence younger stakeholders. Beyond economic participation, there were calls for training and providing information, establishing research centres and community libraries and creating a better image of the environmental management field (RP11; RP09). In other words, the stakeholders viewed the quest for sustainability as a call to strategic planning at both community and sector levels with the creation of institutions and the establishment of budgets to sustain the projects. The Department and various government departments seemed to be undertaking multiple projects; however, the stakeholders saw their efforts as exhibiting a narrow focus rather than the broader structural changes that may be needed for sustainable environmental management (RP04; RP08; RP09; RP11). Participants highlighted,

More research centres must be provided to the young generation interested in environmental management. Community libraries must have reserved environmental places to familiarise youth out of school with the importance of the environmental sector (RP11).

I would recommend consistent communication, not just when required to do something but ongoing communication to keep the relationship healthy. Practical engagement is

also crucial so that other people can learn. We need more media coverage, ideally in small events and not just when there are high-profile people (RP04).

The stakeholders viewed broader community environmental management commitment or ownership as indispensable to sustainability. To this end, suggestions for environmental project engagement called for efforts to increase stakeholder ownership of ecological projects. The findings showed that stakeholders had developed a sense of ownership of their local environments and had observed that their future welfare depended on the condition of their local environments and their upkeep. The government could increase efforts to build this sense of ownership since most of the stakeholders the Department had been working with were engaged in the projects on their own without any government's motivation (RP08). To this end, training, introducing market incentives (RP02), environmental coaching and recruitment (RP08) and raising awareness concerning environmental projects would be effective ways of improving local ownership of ecological projects (RP03; RP10).

Stakeholders have restored a sense of ownership towards our environment and developed a commitment towards the environment. It also has a positive impact on the way the community treat the environment or sustains the environment. I would like to see more community members being custodians of the environment and keeping our natural resources sustainably (RP08).

We also encourage them to plant trees and remove all alien plants. We also encourage them to be able to identify all business opportunities in the recycling industry, like selling cans, bottles, etc. We also encourage them to teach other people in the community about environmental issues (RP02).

The findings on sustainable engagement highlighted the critical need for training, resources, and incentives to ensure long-term stakeholder participation in environmental projects, especially in rural areas. This confirms the stakeholder management theory, which holds that capacity building of stakeholders and fostering ownership is instrumental in project resilience and sustainability (Krick et al., 2005). Similarly, the call for dual communication between the Department and stakeholders post-project completion resonates with Franklin's (2020) assertion that continuous engagement strengthens stakeholder relationships and supports ongoing project maintenance.

The findings identified the demographic gap in environmental project participation, which was based on an overreliance on older cohorts and insufficient engagement with younger

stakeholders. This was being addressed through government funding, the establishment of research centres, community libraries, and market incentives to reflect Dalton's (2019b) recommendation of strategic planning and structural reforms toward including diverse participants and promoting sustainability. Stakeholder suggestions included increasing ownership of environmental projects through training, ecological coaching, and raising awareness, which could be achieved by empowering a community to take an active role in its environment. Strategic initiatives involving a more significant number, improved communications, and a culture of environmental stewardship would be valuable for the continuing interest in environmental projects that engage youth and bring longevity into various situations.

4.12.3. Engagement Management and Communication for Effective Engagement

The stakeholders reported that communication was critical in effective engagement between them and the Department; however, the existing communication models needed to be more integrative and meet the needs of the stakeholders. Concerning communication, delays in transmitting essential information were pointed out as an area that needed improvement (RP06) since details on the Department's initiatives, called for repairs, maintenance meetings, and so forth were essential for stakeholders in their work.

Improved engagement was also seen as the outcome of information exchange such that the need for better communication systems should be coupled with improved information exchanges between the Department and the various stakeholder units. Since stakeholder leaders and representatives had to interact with heads of departments, staff and management, there was a need for a shared understanding of on-the-ground challenges and developments within the departments where sponsorship, project information and so on could be obtained (RP05; RP09).

We have different units and the same goals, but we share very little information. We have to interact more regularly. There should be an integrated brief on environmental queries and identified issues so that when we act, we act with an internal brief rather than expand externally (RP05).

Make sure projects are sustainable, at least for a few years. Project leaders must engage with the heads of departments, staff, management and people on the ground root to share the challenges faced (RP09).

Finally, there was a need for institutional structures to undertake better environmental management through awareness campaigns, training stakeholders and providing access to information and other resources (RP01).

More research must be done and available to support partnerships in environmental management. Community members must also develop engagement in important environmental matters like reducing Climate Change so that we avoid encountering wildfires and environmental destruction that has recently happened in Australia (RP01).

The engagement management and communication findings point out the essential aspect of effective communication in developing fruitful relationships between stakeholders and the Department. Delays in communicating vital information, as identified, reveal shortcomings in the current communication models and thus resonate with the argument of Krick et al. (2005) that timely and integrative communication is vital in achieving effective stakeholder engagement. This would also ensure that the need for better information exchange and frequent interaction between the stakeholder leaders and departmental heads aligns with Franklin's (2020) argument for mutual understanding and collaboration in executing on-the-ground challenges. Establishing institutional structures for better communication and information sharing would allow stakeholders to harmonise their goals with departmental initiatives for coordinated and sustainable project implementation.

Moreover, the call for integration of awareness campaigns, stakeholder training, and resource access reflects Dalton's (2019b) call for capacity-building and structured engagement frameworks to improve project outcomes. Stakeholders' suggestions for research-based support in environmental management underscored the importance of evidence-driven approaches for dealing with pressing issues like climate change and ecological degradation. The existing gaps would be sealed with the adoption of integrated communication systems, promotion of regular information exchange, and institutional support, thereby ensuring the results from environmental projects were collaborative and sustainable.

4.13. Discussion

The results put across a strong objective for the study: to investigate stakeholder engagement practices within the Department. The challenges found were weighty and related to inconsistencies in stakeholder identification and practices that marginalized critical groups. The existing engagement strategies and communication frameworks should be more potent

against such challenges, providing even more reasons for structured frameworks, equitable participation, and better resource allocation.

4.13.1. Importance of Stakeholder Categorization and Prioritization

Stakeholder categorization and prioritization were key aspects of effective engagement, which prior studies have stressed, for instance, Achterkamp and Vos (2022). Their study reveals how stakeholder identification and categorization according to influence, interest, and role in the project would ensure that stakeholder engagement strategies were focused and productive. This is particularly crucial for projects in environmental management, where stakeholders can range from the local community and grassroots organizations to government agencies and private sector players with different interests and capacities. Confirming these insights, the findings of this study placed great emphasis on the requirement of dynamic and adaptive frameworks that can accommodate diverse inputs while balancing power disparities among stakeholders. Franklin (2020) takes these approaches further, arguing that prioritizing stakeholders allows project leaders to manage resources, reduce conflict, and embrace inclusivity. In a Department context, the utility of such a framework becomes apparent in seeking solutions to persistent problems. For example, some are excluded from making decisions, while powerful others command disproportionate influence.

Strong categorization and prioritization practices would allow the Department to align stakeholder roles with project needs, which in turn would allow for more equitable and practical engagement. For example, if prioritized, community stakeholders in rural areas would have better buy-in and sustainability of the activities locally, while engaging high-capacity stakeholders for technical expertise can optimize resource allocation. This approach would foster collaboration and ensure that all voices were heard, empowering underrepresented groups and allowing for a just distribution of responsibilities and benefits. In the final analysis, the categorization and prioritizing of stakeholders is not an operational but a strategic imperative for transforming environmental project management. It would allow the Department to negotiate through the complexity of stakeholder dynamics and assure that plans and executions reflected diverse interests that were sustainable and impactful in project outcomes.

4.13.2. Underutilization of Technology in Engagement

According to Dalton (2019a), technology is one of the essential tools for increasing stakeholder engagement since it can facilitate communication, enhance collaboration, and promote broader

participation in environmental projects. However, this research found that the Department still needed to maximize the use of technological tools to improve stakeholder engagement. This underutilization constituted a significant theoretical-practice gap that limited the Department's ability to address its stakeholders' diverse and dynamic needs effectively. Contemporary technological tools, such as digital communication platforms, data management systems, and social media, are sure to help bring substantial benefits. They offer real-time information sharing, facilitate much broader outreach, and have very effective mechanisms for obtaining feedback. These results, notwithstanding, still strongly indicated that the Department was bound to traditional forms of engaging in practices that involved physical meetings and limited digital communication with a slight reach to dispersed or marginalized communities.

Bridging this gap would, therefore, require embracing new technologies adapted to the specific needs of stakeholders. For example, the integration of platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, and even project management tools would help in improved communication, while data analytics and GIS could be used in improved stakeholder identification and resource allocation. The use of social media extended the reach and included, most notably, the youth in environmental activities. This again underlined the need for staff and stakeholders to be trained in the use of these technologies, ensuring that the benefits were accessible to all and that barriers to adoption were minimized. The Department had the potential to foster even more inclusive, efficient, and responsive engagement processes through embedding technology into its stakeholder management practices. The path taken should not only dovetail nicely with global best practices but also position the Department better to meet the complex environmental challenges and close the gap between theoretical potential and practical implementation.

4.13.3. Contribution to Literature and Policy Recommendations

This study provided a much-needed local perspective on the dynamics of stakeholders and significantly added to the literature on stakeholder engagement in environmental project management. Focusing on this specific Department challenge and opportunity showed the subtle realities of stakeholder interaction in a regional context, which went beyond the general theoretical frameworks and provided actionable recommendations that addressed practical gaps in engagement strategies. The results identified the persistence of challenges in inconsistent stakeholder identification, marginalization of critical groups, and underutilization of technologies in engagement practices, such that addressing those issues entailed a shift to dynamic, inclusive, and adaptive framework conditions that underscored fair and equal participation with an integration of outputs from diverse stakeholder inputs. This aligns with a

broader literature that includes Krick et al. (2005) and Dalton (2019b), which emphasized the importance of inclusivity among stakeholders and driven collaboration by innovation.

From a policy perspective, the study called for reform in stakeholder management practices to improve environmental project outcomes. The recommendations should also include helpful technologies that could simplify communication, better training, resource allocation to empower the stakeholders, and promotion of collaborative platforms with the goal of ensuring fair representation. Some of these provide ways for policymakers to close the theory-practice gap and have sustainable, inclusive engagement processes that respond to evolving environmental challenges. This would finally provide a base for future research and policy development on improving stakeholder engagement within the Department and other regional and global contexts. This underlines the contribution of innovation and reform in stakeholder management to ensure the environmental initiatives it pursues were impactful and sustainable.

4.14. Chapter Summary

This chapter presented a broader discussion of data analysis, including the thematic and computer-assisted methods employed in data analysis. The findings from the data analysis were presented according to the study's objectives, which were aimed at investigating the various approaches related to overall stakeholder management: stakeholder identification, analysis, communication, and engagement. Broadly, the findings showed evidence of very limited to non-existent stakeholder identification methods at the departmental level, with external stakeholders indicating that the Department found them undertaking their projects and that there needed to be formal ways in which the Department identified them. In the stakeholder analysis, it was observed from the findings that stakeholders were grouped into roles as they worked with the Department based on the nature of the projects they were engaged in, their level of competence, and organisational representation, with the stakeholders showing various attributes. It was also noticed that these characteristics were crucial in identifying the patterns of interaction between the Department and its diverse stakeholders. The findings also showed that concerning stakeholder communication, the existing practices were riddled with challenges such as lack of coverage, deliberate marginalisation and discrimination among other stakeholder groups. The various recommendations from the stakeholders alluded to the need for improvement and change in the existing communication practices. Finally, concerning stakeholder engagement, the findings showed unilinear engagement practices, ineffective communication, poor identification, external influence of influential stakeholders on the Department, and lack of resources hampering stakeholder engagement. The following section

discusses these findings in the broader context of the theoretical model employed in this study, the stakeholder management model, and locates the findings of this study within the broader findings in the body of knowledge.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter summarises the case study's research findings, conclusions, and recommendations for stakeholder engagement practices in the Department. The following sections will review the core components of the research, starting with a summary of the chapters and bringing together the lessons learned. The study's conclusions reflect on the importance of a systematic engagement framework, while the recommendations put forward strategic improvements to enhance stakeholder participation, communication, and resource allocation. It also carries on potential future research directions, providing a road to extend the findings in various contexts.

5.2. Summary of Chapters

5.2.1. Chapter 1 – Introduction and Background

Chapter 1 initiated the research process by describing the existing failure of effective stakeholder engagement in environmental projects conducted by the Department, particularly within the eThekweni context. It identified the discrepancy between diverse stakeholder expectations and existing hierarchical engagement routines, highlighting the lack of inclusive structures in current project planning procedures. The chapter began with the presentation of the necessity for the study, bringing forward evidence that supports the argument for systematic, prospective, and contextually meaningful forms of stakeholder engagement. The chapter states the objective of the inquiry, which is to address the theoretical and empirical deficiencies in the literature on stakeholder interaction in the South African public arena, thereby providing a foundation for subsequent research into the effects of such practices on project sustainability and stakeholder trust.

5.2.2. Chapter 2 – Literature Review

Chapter 2 discussed pertinent literature, which revealed a broad disparity between normative stakeholder management norms and real constraints encountered in public projects, particularly in socio-economically varied environments such as eThekweni. Literature pointed out that inadequate stakeholder identification, rigid communication strategies, and inflexible management styles consistently lead to conflict and unfavourable project results. This chapter also helped to highlight these gaps with the review of models such as the Stakeholder Management Umbrella that provided a theoretical basis on which to examine issues the Department was experiencing. This also highlighted the gap in localised empirical studies in

the South African context, underscoring the need for frameworks to consider contextual factors such as resource scarcity and shifting power dynamics among stakeholders.

5.2.3. Chapter 3 – Methodology

Chapter 3 identified the methodological flaws of past studies by employing a qualitative, interpretivist methodology that reflected the real-world experiences of stakeholders involved in environmental projects. This approach enabled the study to move beyond theoretical abstractions and provide an integrated, context-specific understanding of stakeholder interactions. The employment of purposive sampling, semi-structured interviews, and thematic analysis facilitated the attainment of a profound level of insight that is often bypassed in quantitative studies. With the utilisation of credibility-enhancing mechanisms such as member-checking and reflexivity, the research ensured that its results were valid and representative of stakeholder experiences in an effort to make theoretical models confront practice realities in stakeholder engagement scholarship.

5.2.4. Chapter 4 – Presentation of Findings

Chapter 4 addressed significant knowledge gaps by reporting findings that accounted for the disjointed and informal state of stakeholder engagement in the Department's projects. The thematic analysis identified the lack of standardised processes for identification and noted categorisation based on resources and roles, which tended to exclude specific groups. The stakeholders reported experiencing one-way communication and restricted involvement in decision-making. The findings reflect the fact that existing frameworks are inflexible, not inclusive, and unresponsive, which aligns with the significant concerns the study sought to address. The chapter presented a clear picture of operational challenges in stakeholder engagement and opened the door for creating a more effective, context-focused engagement framework.

5.2.5. Chapter 5 – Conclusion and Recommendations

Chapter 5 integrated the findings and directly addressed the initial research lacunae by making practical suggestions embedded in empirical realities. Chapter 5 emphasised the necessity of structured mechanisms of stakeholder identification, inclusive communication channels, and ongoing engagement initiatives contextualised to the eThekweni environment. The chapter also addressed the shortcomings of piecemeal engagement practice through advocating for a unified model of stakeholder management sensitive to the operational realities of the Department. The study also determined avenues for further research, specifically on how adaptable and scalable

these models are to other contexts. Lastly, the chapter hypothesised that more stakeholder engagement would increase project sustainability, trust in institutions, and social cohesion in environmental governance.

5.3. Summary of the Findings

The study aimed to identify stakeholder participation and management in the public sector on the Department of Public Projects in the eThekweni municipality. This research aimed to bring some issues to the right discursive platforms to stimulate deliberate change in the Department and improve public participation in community project design and implementation. Finally, utilising the case of the Department, the study could contribute to stakeholder governance by developing a stakeholder engagement and management model in public projects. Such a model would benefit various settings and circles, including policymaking, practitioners' fields, corporate applications, academic research, and stakeholder analysis, all of which would improve public governance systems.

The demographic of interest in this study was the stakeholders from the local communities in eThekweni impacted by the Department's environmental initiatives and projects. Individuals in seven ecological management programmes, including eThembeni Community Care, Burlington Recyclers, Green Cator Manor, Siqalakabusha Environmental Group, Ingcweti Environmental Youth Group, Siyazenzela Conservancy, and Funukwazi Women's Environmental Group, were studied.

Interviews between the researcher and the subjects were conducted. The interview guide consisted of six (6) specific questions designed to elicit responses from participants on various areas of the Department's stakeholder management methods. It asked for responses on stakeholder identification, stakeholder communication, and stakeholder engagement practices, and their reflections/recommendations on how the Department implemented stakeholder engagement practices in their various communities and how adverse outcomes could be mitigated. The study enlisted the participation of fourteen (14) people from the target demographic. The sample size of 14 participants was determined to ensure adequate data collection depth could be achieved by selecting two individuals from each of the seven target categories. The selection of two individuals from each group was done to guarantee a gender balance among the participants.

The data was analysed using the NVivo 12 software. This is where the codes were primarily constructed from the primary research questions. The responses were coded primarily as

stakeholder characteristics, stakeholders' perceived influence and stakeholder analysis process. According to the e results of the study there were several issues in the transactional contact between the Department and its stakeholders in various environmental initiatives, hampered efforts at constructive and valuable involvement. The following are the identified challenges: engagement appeared to be one-way and originated from the Department, ineffective communication models and methods, a lack of workforce within both the Department and the stakeholders, resulting in a reliance on influential stakeholders, non-responsive stakeholders, opposition agendas that made engagement difficult, and provision of increased resources in the execution of environmental projects.

5.4. Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to understand stakeholder identification practices currently being implemented in the departmental Projects.

5.4.1. Methods of Stakeholder Identification

The data analysis revealed ten interconnected methods employed in identifying stakeholders for the various projects the Department aimed to undertake in multiple communities. Some of these methods were highly frequent, as reported by the frequency with which they were stated in the numerous interviews. However, as reported, these methods should be considered subjective since stakeholders' perspectives reiterated how they had interacted with the Department. These methods that were broadly outlined established that from the findings, stakeholders were identified based on the environmental project at hand, based on whether they were connected with ecological management through consideration of the organisation's (the Department and the stakeholder organisation) plans for environmental recovery; based on ecological conservation interest; through assessment of the goals of the organisation; through identifying groups and individuals with joint environmental mandate; through assessing the alignment of the stakeholders' goals with those of the Department and finally, it was reported that stakeholders presented themselves but were not identified, since there was no recognised formal stakeholder identification process.

The recommendation here would be to have a directional process of identifying and categorising the stakeholders based on their degree of influence when making decisions on a particular problem at hand and determining the degree to which the result of a proposed project impacted them.

5.4.2. To assess the effectiveness and limitations of the existing practices in stakeholder analysis, information systems and engagement processes

The data analysis revealed that the effectiveness and limitations of the reported stakeholder analysis, information systems and engagement could be considered from several perspectives, focusing mainly on stakeholder characteristics, reported stakeholder roles and problems with existing engagement practices.

This could be changed by identifying stakeholders' fundamental interests and concerns. This would help when identifying and clarifying their material issues. To achieve the proposed projects, this process needs to be thorough two-way communication between the Department and stakeholders.

5.4.2.1. *Stakeholder characteristics*

The stakeholder analysis strategies were reflected in the various ways the stakeholders were characterised and grouped, which influenced how the Department engaged with the stakeholders, thus characterising and categorising them. The multiple characteristics reflected grouping based on the group's involvement with the Department, whether the group had high-end competencies functional to the projects at hand, based on previous experience with groups, whether they shared common goals and objectives with the Department, whether they held specific areas of focus, and finally, their relevance to the Department's present projects.

5.4.3. To determine the effective stakeholder communication practices in the Department that may improve the prevailing challenges

In stating this objective, the assumption was made that there were problems in stakeholder engagement stemming primarily from the communication practices of the Department, in which the stakeholders employed less conventional communication models in feedback directed to influence the strategies of the Department. Thus, problems such as protests for services and sabotaging environmental projects were feedback mechanisms of differences between the Department's projects and the community perspectives (Roberts & O'Donoghue, 2013). To this end, the focus of the analysis was on three (3) key aspects of communication that emerged from the study: Communication practices, Feedback mechanisms and positive or negative communication. These findings are presented in turn.

5.4.4. To assess the state of stakeholder engagement between the Department and its stakeholders

The data analysis showed that in the transactional interaction between the Department and its stakeholders in the various environmental projects, several challenges needed to be improved in positive and beneficial engagement efforts. These identified challenges are engagement seemed to be one way and emanated from the Department, the existence of ineffective communication models and methods, lack of workforce within both the Departments creating dependence on influential stakeholders, non-responsive stakeholders, opposition agendas that made engagement difficult, provision of increased resources in the execution of environmental projects and stakeholder engagement hampered by lack of resources.

In any proposed development, when dealing with finances, profit, cash flow, and environment, there will always be the likelihood of conflict. The Department's leadership should moderate the material needs highlighted by critical stakeholders, and those that could and should be handled, in the judgment of the leadership team, including the Board of Directors, should be incorporated into the company's strategy process. Stakeholders were curious about the engagement's outcome and how it related to the company's strategy, business model, risks, opportunities, and key performance indicators. Companies should give stakeholders a balanced perspective, demonstrating how stakeholder engagement had influenced the Department's operations. Feedback on the outcome of the engagement process to stakeholders with whom the organisation had engaged should be included in the engagement plan.

5.5. General Contributions and Conclusion

This study significantly contributes to the field of stakeholder engagement by identifying critical limitations and proposing actionable strategies for improvement within the Department. Through a qualitative analysis of stakeholder perspectives, it became evident that the Department's current stakeholder identification and engagement approach lacked formal structures and consistent communication practices. Focusing on the seven prominent environmental groups, this research indicated the requirement felt by customized stakeholder involvement models toward consideration of specific needs and resource constraints. It put forward a conceptual model through which early stakeholder involvement, structured channels of communication, and committed resources could contribute to facilitating a genuinely participative approach toward managing the chosen environmental project. It, therefore, makes the study an empirical view of the stakeholders' experiences about the Department and fills a

critical gap in the literature on public-sector stakeholder engagement within the South African context, which was primarily underrepresented in past research.

This research outcome, therefore, provided the requirement experienced by all in the spotlight for an integrated framework where communication, training, and resource support come from practical stakeholder engagement pillars. The proposed model was consistent with the Department's long-term environmental goals, calling for stakeholder ownership and sustainable practices while fostering trust and cooperation among community groups. This research lays a foundation for developing context-specific engagement practices that accommodate the unique socio-political dynamics of KwaZulu-Natal. That is the practical worth of the study in contributions toward enhancing stakeholder relations and furthering environmental governance. It could, therefore, become a departmental model for public-sector engagement in other regional and national contexts to ensure more sustainable and inclusive environmental management practices. This could further be emphasized in the study recommendations towards more structured and inclusive stakeholder engagement within the Department. Another recommendation is to develop a comprehensive framework with clear criteria for identifying stakeholders, supported by a centralized database to help maintain consistent and accessible records for long-term collaboration. The development should also include better information flow and dynamic feedback mechanisms, where transparency in communication strategies and periodic updates lead to meaningful stakeholder engagement. The capacity-building programmes, including conflict resolution and community engagement training, are designed to improve the Department's capability in dealing with diverse stakeholder interests and trust building. This is highlighted with a participatory approach involving stakeholders in the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases. Local advisory committees complement this in identifying specific solutions and early potential for conflict. Lastly, establishing a specialized stakeholder engagement unit to monitor, oversee, and improve practices would show the Department's commitment to sustainable and community-based environmental management.

5.6. Recommendations

These findings underline the requirement for a more structured and inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement within the Department. First, there should be a holistic framework through which stakeholder identification occurs to ensure transparent and standardized criteria to identify all relevant stakeholders. This framework would ensure consistency in bringing in

primary and secondary stakeholders and increase the Department's ability to engage a wide variety of community groups effectively. A centralized database of stakeholders would allow the Department to keep accurate, accessible records that support continued communication and collaboration, thus developing long-term relationships beyond individual projects.

The Department should also enhance information flow and feedback mechanisms, such that the process of engagement may be dynamic and responsive. This can be done by preparing a communication-oriented strategy with a view toward maximum transparency and providing periodical updates, through which stakeholders can be kept abreast of developments and meaningfully involved in the decision-making process of the project. It would further increase the capacity of the Department to handle the varied interests of stakeholders through periodic training on conflict resolution, effective communication, and community engagement for both staff and stakeholders. The said sessions may also include workshops where mutual understanding of problems and collaborative problem-solving skills are inculcated to avoid misunderstandings and reinforce community trust in environmental initiatives being carried out by the Department.

Furthermore, the Department should adopt a participative approach in the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of environmental projects. The early and continuous involvement of all stakeholders in this process would help in empowerment among communities by giving them a voice in designing project outcomes, which would ultimately yield greater levels of community ownership and commitment. A participatory approach would also be supported by the establishment of local advisory committees or working groups, ensuring stakeholder input on project adaptations. The same kind of participatory structure would provide more tailored solutions to the local environmental challenges and would also help in the identification of potential conflicts for early intervention.

Ultimately, the Department should establish a specific stakeholder engagement unit that would monitor and refine practices to institutionalize these improvements. The unit would provide overall oversight, track stakeholder satisfaction, and recommend adjustments based on periodic evaluations of engagement effectiveness. Periodic assessment of stakeholder feedback and the impact of the engagement practices on the success of the projects would help the Department identify the best way forward in the improvement of practices. The establishment of this unit would reflect a commitment to sustainable, accountable stakeholder engagement and reflect

the Department's commitment to promoting collaborative, community-focused environmental management.

5.7. Direction for Further Research

Future research may seek to extend stakeholder engagement practices across departments and regions, with the view to developing comparative insights and testing the broader applicability of findings presented in this study. More nuanced insight into how stakeholder engagement frameworks perform in varied socio-political and geographic contexts might also further knowledge of how local contexts shape the potential effectiveness of engagement strategies in public environmental management. The impact of different organizational structures and the availability of resources on identifying which elements contribute to successful stakeholder relationships in both well-resourced and under-resourced settings can also be examined through comparative studies. A greater variety of more rural or marginalized communities would further enrich the data and bring out unique challenges and adaptations related to stakeholder engagement that may not rise to the surface in urban-focused studies.

Moreover, future studies could delve into the long-term impacts of participatory stakeholder engagement on environmental project outcomes, offering empirical evidence on the sustainability and effectiveness of these practices. Research that employs longitudinal methods could track how stakeholder involvement from early project stages affects community ownership, conflict resolution, and the resilience of project outcomes over time. Research could also focus on how technology might activate the engagement processes, including digital platforms and feedback mechanisms that would further facilitate communications, making engagement more accessible and transparent. A related future research path could involve a look at multiple types of stakeholder engagements in environmental policy formation and adaptation at the regional scale, informing broader policy recommendations and frameworks supportive of community-inclusive environmental governance.

5.8. Chapter Summary

This chapter overviewed the research findings, conclusions, and recommendations on how stakeholder engagement practices could be improved within the Department. It summarised each chapter, which assisted with a cohesive overview of the journey covered in the study, from identifying the research problem to analysing engagement practices with environmental groups in eThekwinini. This case study is typical of some of the challenges in practices today, such as the limitation of communication channels, lack of formal identification of stakeholders,

and poor resource allocation, which can impact project sustainability and the satisfaction of stakeholders. This finally calls for developing an inclusive and structured approach to a stakeholder management framework that can handle the issues raised. This may be by initiating the stakeholders' process early enough and being transparent in communications. This calls for the establishment of a dedicated stakeholder engagement unit, implementation of standardized identification processes, and more frequent training related to the improvement of general skills in conflict resolution and collaborative problem-solving. This chapter, concludes with a call for more research in comparative studies across different regions to test the adaptability of the findings in diverse socio-economic settings. It also calls for exploring the longer-term impacts of such participatory engagement on project outcomes, mostly in rural or under-resourced community settings. This chapter revealed that one of the essential contributors to sustainable environmental management and strengthening public sector governance could be a more nuanced stakeholder engagement model.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – GATEKEEPERS LETTER



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM
AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

TO	Assistant Director: Environmental Management Ms Nomalanga Hlophe
FROM	Mr Vusumuzi Khanyile
SUBJECT	PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH – MCOM MANAGEMENT
DATE	07 January 2021

**RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AS PART OF THE RESEARCH DISSERTATION REQUIREMENT FOR
M.COM COURSEWORK DEGREE**

1. PURPOSE

To request the approval for Mr Vusumuzi Khanyile (200200661) to do a research project entitled:

**Stakeholder Engagement Practices in the Environmental Management Projects at eThekweni Economic
Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs.**

Supervisor: Prof. Sadhasivan Perumal - [REDACTED] / 031 260 7554 Perumals@ukzn.ac.za

2. BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION

Research students undertake projects that invariably involve the collection of empirical data from organisations. In this way students are given the opportunity to investigate and report on the practical issues facing organisations in real life settings. Typically, this project necessitates data gathering by paper-based questionnaires or interviews.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There will be no financial implications to the organisation.

2. BACKGROUND/DISCUSSION

Research students undertake projects that invariably involve the collection of empirical data from organisations. In this way students are given the opportunity to investigate and report on the practical issues facing organisations in real life settings. Typically, this project necessitates data gathering by paper-based questionnaires or interviews.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

There will be no financial implications to the organisation.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Your assistance in permitting access for Mr Vusumuzi Khanyile (200200661) to use your organisation for the purposes of this research will be most appreciated.

Yours faithfully

Mr Vusumuzi Khanyile

Environmental Officer Grade B - Environmental Empowerment – eThekweni District

Approved / ~~Not approved~~

Comments:

Granted

UMNYANGO WEZOKUTHUTHUKISWA KOMNOTO, EZOKUVAKASHA NOKONGIWA KWEMVELO KZN
Private Bag X9152, Pietermaritzburg, 3200
2021-01-07
270 Jabu Ndlovu Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3200
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS

Ms Nomalanga Hlophe

Assistant Director - eThekweni District

Signature:

Date:

07/01/2021

Appendix B – ETHICAL CLEARANCE LETTER



12 March 2021

Mr Vusumuzi Khanyile (200200661)
School Of Man Info Tech & Gov
Westville Campus

Dear Mr Khanyile,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002555/2021

Project title: Stakeholder engagement practices in environmental management projects at eThekwin Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 09 March 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 12 March 2022.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix C – INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

IN- DEPTH INTERVIEW GUIDE

PREAMBLE

- Introduce myself.
- Thank the participant for agreeing to the meeting.
- Briefly describe the purpose of the study. Explain that I am interested in environmental management work.
- Explain that it is their experiences and opinions that I am seeking and encourage them to express themselves freely.
- Explain to the participant their right to confidentiality and anonymity. They are allowed not to answer questions and can take a break/leave the interview at any time.
- Explain the need for tape recording and testing of the recording device.
- Ask if they have any questions.
- Request the participant to read and sign the informed consent form.

INTERVIEW

6. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How are stakeholders identified in the environmental management projects at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs?
 - Describe the stakeholders and their roles in the environmental management projects.
 - What is the process of stakeholder identification for an environmental management project?
- In an in-depth manner, explain to me how stakeholders are analyzed in the environmental management projects at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs?

- What characteristics do you consider when selecting stakeholders?
 - How do stakeholders influence environmental projects?
 - Explain to me the stakeholders' communication practices in the environmental management projects at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs?
 - List and describe the various methods of communication with stakeholders on environmental management projects?
-

- Highlight positive and negative communication practices on a specific environmental management projects?
- How are stakeholders engaged in the environmental management projects at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs?
 - Share with me, how do you get feedback on stakeholder engagement?
 - What are the benefits of stakeholder engagement?
- What are your recommendations to improve the stakeholder engagement practices in the environmental management projects at the eThekweni Department of Economic

- What are your recommendations to improve the stakeholder engagement practices in the environmental management projects at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs?
 - Based on stakeholder identification, what would you recommend to improve stakeholder engagement in the environmental management projects?
 - Based on analysis of stakeholder practices, what would you recommend to improve stakeholder engagement in the environmental management projects?
 - Based on stakeholder communication practices, what would you recommend to improve stakeholder engagement in the environmental management projects?
 - Based on stakeholder engagement practices, what would you recommend to improve stakeholder engagement in the environmental management projects?

Closing Remarks

Is there anything else on these issues you would like to add that I did not cover in this interview?

Thank you for making the time!

Appendix D – INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL For research with human participants

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

Date: 24 February 2021

Greetings,

My name is **Vusumuzi Khanyile**, a MCom: Management student, from the School of Management, Information Technology and Governance, at University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, (student number: 200200661; contact number: [REDACTED] or via email 200200661@stu.ukzn.ac.za), and my supervisor is **Professor Sadhasivan Perumal** (contact number: [REDACTED] or via email PerumalS@ukzn.ac.za).

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research to the **Stakeholder Engagement Practices in the Environmental Management Projects at eThekweni Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs**. The study aims to assess the used and existing stakeholder engagement and practices of management at the eThekweni Department of Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs to document existing efficiencies, inefficiencies and limitations with the objective of developing an integrated proactive approach to stakeholder engagement and management that will assist in developing mitigation methods to the present challenges being faced by the Department. This will be seen to be instrumental in filling the existing gap between the technical, organizational and socioeconomic processes in design and execution of environmental management programs. The study is self-funded by the researcher.

The duration of your participation if you choose to participate and remain in the study is expected to be about 30 minutes to complete the interview. Your participation in the study is voluntary and by participating, you are granting the researcher permission to use your

The duration of your participation if you choose to participate and remain in the study is expected to be about 30 minutes to complete the interview. Your participation in the study is voluntary and by participating, you are granting the researcher permission to use your responses, and your personal information, such as your name and telephone number are not required in this interview. Please note that you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequence. Your anonymity will be maintained by the researcher and the School of Management, Information Technology & Governance and your responses will not be used for any purposes outside of this study.

The study will be conducted in the province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, in eThekweni Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs.

The target population will be the individuals in the seven environmental management projects; eThembeni Community Care; Burlington Recyclers; Green Cator Manor; Siqalakabusha Environmental Group; Ingcweti Environmental Youth Group; Siyazenzela Conservancy; and Funukwazi Women's Environmental Group. These groups have at least 20 members in each group with selected leaders, thus yielding a large enough population of participants who can potentially be recruited into the study. A large target population is also an advantage, since with qualitative data, there must not be missing observations, but information must be collected for analysis to required depth. A large target population increases the data collection space, hence ensures that the anticipated depth and richness

of data is achieved, since most of the participants in these projects work as equal beneficiaries to the projects and are likely to have access to similar information.

A total of 14 participants will be recruited to participate in the intended study due to vast experience in the environmental management projects and seniority in the field, composed

A total of 14 participants will be recruited to participate in the intended study due to vast experience in the environmental management projects and seniority in the field, composed of individuals of the various stakeholders associated with the 7 environmental management projects namely; eThembeni Community Care; Burlington Recyclers; Green Cator Manor; Siqalakabusha Environmental Group; Ingcweti Environmental Youth Group; Siyazenzela Conservancy and Funukwazi Women's Environmental Group. The seven projects have a stakeholder base of at least 20 participants with selected leaders, thus yielding a large enough population of participants who can potentially be recruited into the study and the participants will be purposively selected and recruited with 2 members selected from each project group in order to get different perspective within one environmental management project and avoid favourism. A large target population is also an advantage, since with qualitative data there must not be missing observations, but information must be collected for analysis to required depth. A large target population will increase the data collection space, hence ensures that the anticipated depth and richness of data is achieved, since most of the participants in these projects work as equal beneficiaries to the projects and are likely to have access to similar information. The numbers will be divided equitably across gender dimensions to ensure participation of both males and females from the groups. These will be recruited into the study, and will participate in in-depth interviews with the researcher.

The study will involve the following procedures;

- Step 1: The study will use literature and experts to collect data
- Step 2: The data will be collected using interviews and for the purpose of sending and receiving, no surveys will be distributed or collected physically, instead in-depth interviews will be used and participants and the interviewer will wear mask to encourage social distancing in compliance with covid-19 regulations.
- Step 3: The recorded electronic responses will be checked and coded with reference numbers and captured onto an excel spreadsheet to produce descriptive and inferential statistics which will be protected by a password which will be accessible to researcher and the supervisor only.

- Step 4: The qualitative data will be analyzed using thematic analysis and that focuses on textual analysis of qualitative information by breaking it down into emergent themes through the researcher's close examination of the qualitative data for identification of common patterns, themes, topics, phases and meanings that tend to come up repeatedly in the data.
- Step 5: Trustworthiness and credibility of research will be maintained. The study will make use of empirically tested data collection methods and practices as well as methods of data analysis that have been employed in other research studies. These will be adjusted and configured to meet the requirements for the intended inquiry. Trustworthiness will be ensured that participants will be interviewed who are involved and active participants with the selected

groups, and have been involved with the projects in such a way that they have recognized depth of knowledge of the projects, their outcomes and the relationship with the Department.

- Step 6: The actual recordings will be scanned and archived in an electronic folder that will be protected with a password shared between researcher and supervisor only.
- Step 7: The final study will be published online, and the link will be shared with all the participants.

Step 8: All scanned data will then be securely stored in the school MIG for a period of five years, and upon receiving formal authorization from the UKZN to destroy the research data; all data files will be permanently destroyed in a manner that it cannot be recreated and irreversible.

Please note that the researcher will uphold both procedural and human research ethics to ensure privacy, anonymity, confidentiality, and voluntary participation during data collection process. An application for the gate keepers' letter from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal Ethics committee and eThekweni Municipality - Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs, where the study is located will be sought.

The study will provide no direct benefits to participants; however through the findings which will be the results of your participation, we hope that it will address problems facing many environmental management projects in various countries and cities. Additionally, the results of the study will be critically analyzed in an environmental management perspective to see how the environmental project teams can improve their stakeholder engagement strategies and by so doing, position the environmental projects of greater Durban in a global market towards environmental stewardship.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_____).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions about participating in the study, you may contact the researcher at (200200661@stu.ukzn.ac.za) or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION
Research Office, Westville Campus
Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban 4000 KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA
Tel: 27 31 260 4557- Fax: 27 31 260 4609
Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Sincerely

Vusumuzi Khanyile

BREC UKZN Oct 2008

3

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I have been informed about the study entitled **Stakeholder Engagement Practices in the Environmental Management Projects at eThekweni Economic Development, Tourism and Environmental Affairs** by Vusumuzi Khanyile.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study I understand that I may contact the researcher at 200200661@stu.ukzn.ac.za

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness
(Where applicable)

Date

Signature of Translator
(Where applicable)

Date