



**WORLD
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OUTLOOK 2019

**Making Science, Innovation and Research work
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EDITED BY

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STAKEHOLDER POWER AND SUSTAINABILITY OF HEALTH PROJECTS IN UGANDA: THE MEDIATING ROLE OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE

This paper examines the mediating role of stakeholder engagement on the relationship between stakeholder power and the sustainability of health projects in Uganda.

METHODOLOGY

The study is cross-sectional and co-relational. Data were collected using a questionnaire and analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Mediation was tested using Med Graph.



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A major objective of every project is the delivery of benefits to the project beneficiaries after financial and technical assistance has been terminated (Torpey et al., 2010). Project sustainability is one of the most important challenges of our time. Sustainability is the ability of a project to continue its mission or programme far into the future. All projects have to end eventually, but their impact should continue. Stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement are two of the factors that affect the sustainability of any project (Spitzeck and Hansen, 2010).

FINDINGS

Findings indicate that stakeholder power positively influences project sustainability, and there is a positive and significant relationship between stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement. Findings further show that stakeholder engagement mediates the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability.

LIMITATIONS/IMPLICATIONS

Given that this study was cross-sectional, monitoring changes in behaviour over time was not possible. The results are useful for decision-makers when planning and implementing sustainable projects.

Stakeholder power is an important factor that influences a project's success and sustainability (Burchell and Cook, 2008). Bourne and Walker (2005) earlier affirmed that one of the essential elements to attaining project sustainability is to have all the stakeholders involved in project activities. Stakeholder engagement is increasingly becoming a part of a project's practice in order to deliver excellent project outcomes (Mellahi and Wood, 2003). When stakeholders are engaged in project activities, it provides them with full opportunities to share their views, needs and knowledge on the project. Stakeholder engagement builds consensus through bringing together a diverse range of stakeholders to share needs, information, ideas and knowledge, and harmonise the objectives of individual groups to reach common societal goals. It also provides them with appropriate information so that they can understand the process, the issues and values.

Despite all the above advantages, project sustainability is still a major challenge in many developing countries. Large numbers of projects, implemented at huge cost, often tend to experience difficulties with sustainability (Torpey et al., 2010). In Uganda, health projects have not been maintained at a level that provides ongoing prevention and treatment for health problems after the termination of major financial, managerial and technical assistance from external donors. For example, the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (GAVI) allocated over US\$4.3 million to the Ministry of Health to be used as a vaccine stabilisation fund to immunise children in Uganda. Critical decisions regarding planning project interventions, implementation, monitoring and evaluation were made with little or no input from the implementers. Their influence on the project was underestimated. This resulted in the introduction of unfamiliar interventions, conflicts among stakeholders, irregularities in the administration of the project, lack of support and commitment from key stakeholders to the projects' activities, and finally the failure to deliver the project's sustainable benefits (Namulondo, 2012).

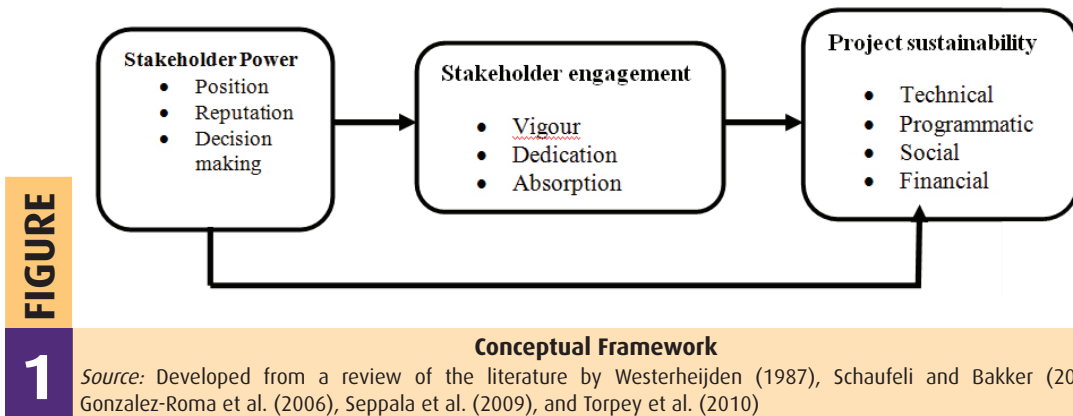
ORIGINALITY

This is the first study to examine stakeholders' power and stakeholder engagement on project sustainability of health projects in Uganda.

KEYWORDS

Project sustainability; stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement; health projects

Although project sustainability continues to interest researchers (Pluye et al., 2004), there is currently no known empirical support for the relationship between stakeholder power, stakeholder engagement and project sustainability in health sector projects in Uganda. While the major objective of health projects is to continue delivering benefits to its beneficiaries after the project's execution and closure, many health projects in Uganda fail to attain sustainability after the withdrawal of donor support. Furthermore, given the growing importance of project sustainability in today's competitive environment, there is a need to establish the extent to which stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement influence project sustainability in the Ministry of Health, Uganda (UNAIDS, 2008). This paper therefore provides evidence of the relationship between stakeholder power, stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of health projects in Uganda.



LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

This paper reviews existing scholarly literature about stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement, and their relationship with project sustainability.

Stakeholder Power and Stakeholder Engagement

The concept of stakeholder power relates to the ability of a stakeholder group to influence managerial decisions (Burchell and Cook, 2008) (see Figure 1). Including stakeholders in project governance and the control of critical resources such as finance and labour, gives a stakeholder group power to influence managerial decisions (Lozano, 2005). Empirical evidence suggests that stakeholders who control resources are able to get their information needs met. For example, Thijssens et al. (2015) found that the greater the power management accord to a stakeholder group, the greater the level of information voluntarily disclosed in the annual reports to meet the needs of such a stakeholder group. Qu et al. (2013) also found that different stakeholder groups exert different degrees of influence on firms'

decision-making in respect of information voluntarily disclosed. From the discussion above, it can be inferred that when stakeholders have powers, they can influence decision-making and, in the long run, impact the sustainability of projects. Therefore:

H1: Stakeholder power positively influences project sustainability.

Stakeholder Engagement and Project Sustainability

According to Partridge et al. (2005), stakeholder engagement can be described as an organisation's efforts to involve stakeholders in its activities and decision-making processes to enhance project performance and commitment. Involving stakeholders in decision-making processes is a tool used by mature private and public sector organisations, especially when they want to develop understanding and agree to solutions on complex issues or issues of concern. If policies and schemes do not align with stakeholder expectations and needs, all the efforts to promote such initiatives will be ineffective, especially in matters where the direct and active participation of stakeholders is essential for the success of a project (Yau, 2012). Kaur and Lodhia (2018) posited that the involvement of stakeholders is essential to establish an efficient stakeholder-centric accountability system. Quality stakeholder engagement generates creative solutions to address stakeholders' concerns, increases responsiveness, transparency and accountability, and establishes closer ties to stakeholders interested in sustainability performance (Hörisch et al., 2015).

Gao and Zhang (2006) earlier noted that meaningful engagement needs to allow stakeholders to assist in the identification of other stakeholders, and allow stakeholders to voice their views without restriction and without fear of penalty. Knowledge sourced from engagement with internal and external stakeholders contributes to a project's sustainable innovation (Ayuso et al., 2011). Stakeholder engagement is intended to help the practitioners fully realise the benefits of stakeholder engagement in their organisation, to compete in an increasingly complex and ever-changing business environment, while at the same time bringing about systemic change towards sustainable development. Therefore, stakeholder engagement is a core area that is necessary to build stakeholders' commitment to a project in order to achieve desired outcomes, which is essential for projects that wish to be beneficial and sustainable (Cuginotti, 2009). Therefore:

H2: There is a positive relationship between stakeholder engagement and project sustainability.

Stakeholder Power and Project Sustainability

Stakeholders' powers are vital to the successful continuation of a project because their willingness to continuously support the objectives of the project leads to a project's sustainability. Bourne and Walker (2005) emphasise that stakeholders can influence the outcomes and sustainability of projects, indicating that the method of identifying stakeholders and the analysis of their power, and how this influence can be measured, all determine a project's *ex-post* performance. Interests of all major stakeholders have to be put into consideration

when making decisions on how to run a project. Therefore, project managers need a robust relationship with stakeholders and work within the culture and political environment of a project to ensure greater project support for project sustainability.

Stakeholder power in project decision-making has efficiency gains leading to successful project implementation hence project sustainability (Rothman and Friedman, 2001). However, when power, influence and engagement do not come together, it can lead to stakeholders being frustrated when carrying out project activities, leading to poor results and, therefore the unsustainability of projects (Burchell and Cook, 2008). Therefore, in order to form successful project relationships, there is a need to understand that different stakeholders have different influences and expectations of a project, and this affects project sustainability. Failure to manage stakeholder's interests and expectations results in project failure; this then leads to unsustainable projects. Therefore:

H3: There is a positive relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability.

Stakeholder Engagement Mediating the Relationship between Stakeholder Power and Project Sustainability

Different scholars have attempted to appreciate the effect of stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement on project sustainability. Andriof and Waddock (2002) affirm that, to support project sustainability, the influence and interests of stakeholders need to be considered and appreciated. This is because this leads to their engagement and commitment to a project throughout the project's life. It is therefore important to consider the stakeholders' interest by looking at their position, reputation and decision-making so they can be committed to, and engaged in, a project's activities; this is because they are accountable for the sustainability of a project's outcomes (PMI, 2008). This indicates that there is a strong relationship between stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement on project sustainability.

H4: Stakeholder engagement mediating the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a cross-sectional and quantitative research design. A cross-sectional design was preferred because data were collected at a specific point in time (Wagner and Gregory, 2014), while a quantitative research design was preferred because it is the glue that holds the research project together (Trochim and Land, 1982).

The study population comprised of 130 health projects from the Ministry of Health. The unit of analysis was health projects in Uganda, and the unit of inquiry was project staff and project beneficiaries. The sample size was 113 health projects; however, only 101 health

projects responded, giving a response rate of 89%. The sample size was selected using Krejcie and Morgan’s (1970) table. Two project staff respondents and one beneficiary respondent from each project were targeted. Simple random sampling was employed in order to obtain representative views from the different health projects. A self-administered questionnaire was used for data collection (Bakkabulindi, 2004). This questionnaire was designed according to the objectives of the study. A 5-point Likert scale was used, with the responses ranging from 1-Strongly agree to 5-Strongly disagree. Part one of the questionnaire was used to gather biographic information of the respondents, and part two gathered information on the study variables.

The researcher utilised previously developed and validated measures to assess the constructs of interest. Stakeholder power (position, reputation and decision-making) was measured using the scales developed by Westerheijden (1987), while stakeholder engagement (vigour, dedication, absorption) was measured with scales developed by Gonzalez-Roma et al. (2006) and Seppala et al. (2009). Lastly, project sustainability (technical, programmatic, social and financial) was measured according to Torpey et al. (2010).

TABLE 1	Reliability and Validity of Instruments			
	Variables	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Content Validity Index
	Stakeholder Power	16	0.747	0.8235
	Stakeholder Engagement	17	0.839	0.9411
	Project Sustainability	19	0.771	0.9736

Source: Devised by author

The validity of the study instrument was determined using the Content Validity Index (CVI). The questionnaire was assessed to ensure that the scale items were meaningful, the statements generally understandable and able to capture the issues under study. To ensure the accuracy, internal consistency and completeness, the reliability of the instrument was established using Cronbach’s Alpha Coefficient test (Cronbach, 1951). An alpha coefficient of above 0.70 for individual test variables was accepted, meaning the instrument was reliable (Nunnally and Bernstein, 1994). The Validity and Content Validity of the instrument is shown in the table above:

The results in Table 1 indicate that the Content Validity Indices and alpha coefficient values were greater than 0.7, implying that the questionnaire was both valid and reliable.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected from the field were compiled, sorted, edited, classified, and coded into a coding sheet. They were then aggregated and merged into a unit of analysis and analysed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Pearson correlation analysis was used to establish relationships between study variables. Hierarchical linear regression was used to predict project sustainability by establishing the contribution of each individual independent variable. Mediation tests by Jose (2008), using the Med graph and Sobel test, were used to establish the mediating role of stakeholder engagement on the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability.

TABLE	2 The Zero Order Pearson Correlation Matrix			
		1	2	3
	Stakeholder power (1)	1		
	Stakeholder engagement (2)	0.543**	1	
	Project sustainability (3)	0.705**	0.589**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
Source: Devised by author

RESULTS

Background Characteristics

Most of the respondents were male with 53.8%, 60% were married, 37% were youths, and 36.7% were undergraduates. This implies that the information was reliable since respondents were responsible, energetic, educated, and therefore able to understand the variables under study. Project mostly run for 2–5 years and benefit beneficiaries for 1–2 years, implying that health projects are not yet sustainable.

Results from Table 2 indicate that there was a significant positive relationship between stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement ($r=0.543^{**}$, $P\leq0.01$). This implies that a positive change in stakeholder power leads to a positive change in stakeholder engagement in health projects.

Results further show that there is a significant positive relationship between stakeholder engagement and project sustainability ($r=0.589^{**}$, $P\leq0.01$). This implies that a positive change in stakeholder engagement leads to a positive change in project sustainability.

3

TABLE

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		VIF
Variables	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE	
Constant	3.709**	0.138	1.974**	0.275	1.304**	0.250	
Project employees	0.44	0.34	0.001	0.028	0.012	0.024	1.352
Duration of the project	0.120	0.069	0.055	0.057	0.004	0.044	1.277
Stakeholder engagement			0.494**	0.071	0.254**	0.069	1.530
Stakeholder power					0.425**	0.064	1.532
R ²	0.035		0.354		0.558		
Adj R ²	0.015		0.334		0.540		
R ² change			0.319		0.204		
F change	1.752		47.948		44.411		
Sig F change	0.179		0.000		0.000		
F	1.752		17.710		30.330		
Sig	0.179		0.000		0.000		

**Sig<0.01

Source: Devised by author

In addition, results show a significant positive relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability ($r=0.705^{**}$, $P\leq 0.01$). This implies that stakeholder power influence project sustainability.

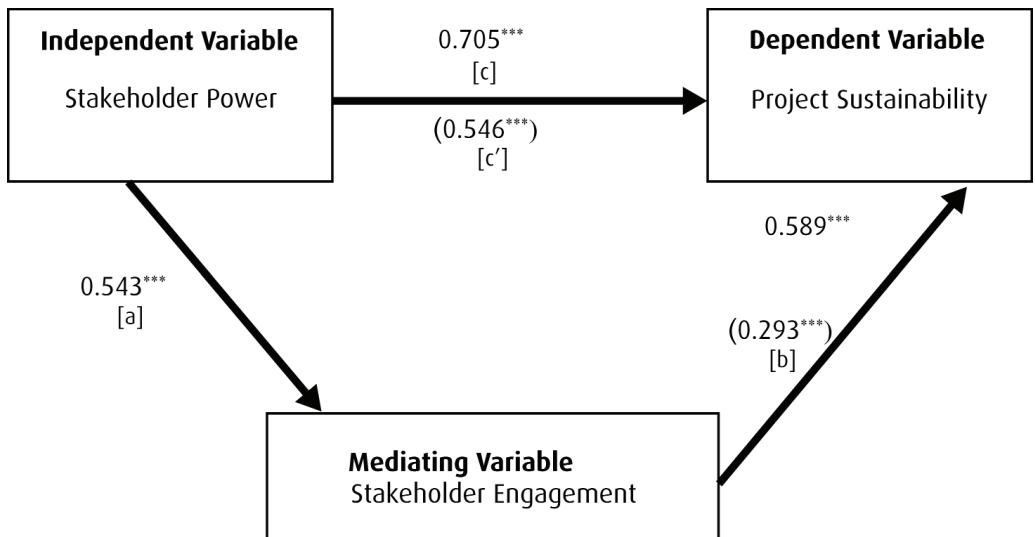
Prediction of Project Sustainability

Hierarchical regression was done to examine the predictive potential of each of the independent variables on the dependent variable (see Table 3). Model 1 shows that control variables did not significantly affect project sustainability and therefore did not affect the results

on project sustainability. In Model 2, stakeholder engagement predicted 31.9% of the variance in project sustainability. In Model 3, stakeholder power accounted for 20.4% of the variation in project sustainability. Stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement are significant predictors of project sustainability, accounting for 55.8% of the variance in project sustainability. Stakeholder engagement was explained as (B=0.494, Sig=0.000), compared to stakeholder power (B=0.425, Sig=0.000). The regression model was significant, showing the regression was significant (sig <0.01).

4	Mediation Table		
TABLE	Type of Mediation	Significant	
	Sobel z-value	3.183366	P=0.001456
	95% Symmetrical Confidence interval		
	Lower	0.04746	
	Higher	0.19954	
	Unstandardised indirect effect		
	a*b	0.1235	
	se	0.0388	
	Effective Size measures		
	Standardised Coefficients		R ² Measures (Variance)
	Total	0.705	0.497
	Direct	0.546	0.210
	Indirect	0.159	0.286
	Indirect to Total ratio	0.225	0.576

Source: Devised by author



FIGURE

2

Path Model 1

Source: Devised by author

Mediation of Stakeholder Engagement on the Relationship between Stakeholder Power and Project Sustainability

The researcher followed standards set by Baron and Kenny (1986) for testing mediating variables, and met the three conditions before stakeholder engagement is considered as a mediating variable. First, stakeholder engagement must be significantly associated with project sustainability, then, stakeholder power must be a significant predictor to project sustainability. Finally, stakeholder power must significantly account for stakeholder engagement. When all these conditions were met, mediation was tested. Results show that the absolute effect of stakeholder power on project sustainability is less in regression three (standardised beta = 0.546) than in regression two (standardised beta = 0.705), as illustrated in Table 4 and Figure 2 above.

The results above indicate that there was a significant partial mediation of stakeholder engagement on the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability (Sobel z-value = 3.183366, $P=0.001456$; Direct=0.546 and Indirect=0.159). This indicates that the association between stakeholder power and project sustainability was significantly reduced (from 0.705^{***} to 0.546^{***}) by the inclusion of stakeholder engagement in the third regression model (Jose, 2008).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The results indicate a positive relationship between stakeholder power and stakeholder engagement, therefore supporting H1. This implies that when stakeholders have the ability to influence decisions, they become more engaged in project activities. These results are in line with Parmar et al. (2010) who noted that the relative influence and potential power a stakeholder has on a project will determine the level of engagement for the project team. Therefore, stakeholder power is a strong factor of stakeholder engagement (ArunKumar and Renugadevi, 2013).

Results also found that stakeholder engagement significantly predicts project sustainability, therefore confirming H2. The result shows that when stakeholders are engaged in project activities, project sustainability will be realised. Implying that engaging stakeholders leads to their commitment to a project, therefore promoting its sustainability. In support of Torpey et al. (2010), stakeholders' engagement with a project enhances project sustainability in terms of technical, programmatic, social and financial sustainability.

Stakeholder power significantly predicts project sustainability of health projects. This confirms H3, which states that there is a positive significant positive relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability. The finding implies that the sustainability of health projects is affected by the power from different stakeholders. With their power, stakeholders can affect the implementation of a project due to their strength or force. Stakeholders are vital to the successful continuation of a project; their unwillingness to continuously support the vision or objectives of a project causes many projects to fail to be sustainable. This is in line with Parmar (2010), who suggest that stakeholder power is a predictor of project sustainability.

The findings indicate that stakeholder engagement mediates the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability. Results show that stakeholder power significantly and positively affects the project sustainability of health projects. However, the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability will be easy if stakeholder engagement is a mediator. This means that stakeholder engagement is a conduit through which stakeholder power influences project sustainability. This is in line with (Salanova and Schaufeli, 2008), who noted that stakeholder engagement as a mediating variable helps to clearly understand how stakeholder power affects project sustainability.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the mediating role of stakeholder engagement on the relationship between stakeholder power and project sustainability. Results indicate that stakeholder engagement was a better predictor of project sustainability, followed

by stakeholder power. When project managers involve stakeholders in project activities, they know the interests of the different stakeholders. This will enable them to understand the different stakeholders, their power and influence; this will later help them to achieve a project's objectives and, therefore, the ability of health projects to continue delivering benefits will be assured.

Results further showed that stakeholder engagement mediates stakeholder power on project sustainability. This means that stakeholder engagement is a channel through which stakeholder power is associated with project sustainability. The results showed that the mediation was partial since stakeholder power had both a direct and an indirect effect on project sustainability. Stakeholder engagement plays a mediating role and therefore project managers and other project stakeholders should take this into consideration to be in position to predict project sustainability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Stakeholder engagement was a better predictor of project sustainability; therefore, there is a need to engage both internal and external stakeholders in the decision-making process and in all project activities. Project managers should be in a position to identify the different stakeholders' influence. If all this is done, stakeholders will be fully engaged and committed to project activities, therefore leading to project sustainability. Project managers need to identify different stakeholders, know their interests and discover how they can be involved and committed to project activities; in this way, group engagement results in quality project work leading to project sustainability.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The study focused on health projects in Kampala. This limited the generalisation of the findings to all health projects. However, given the large scope of health projects, the study gives a picture of the situation in Uganda on which other studies can build.

The study also focused on a cross-sectional research design. The behaviour of the variables over a long period could not be completely analysed; this restricted the applicability of the findings. However, a longitudinal study would give different results from those obtained using a cross-sectional research design.

Further research should be undertaken to explore the concept of sustainability in other areas of study, such as projects in construction, agriculture, education, entrepreneurship and information technology.

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BIOGRAPHY

Ms Shamim Nantumbwe has an MBA and BOIM and is currently working as a Lecturer at Makerere University Business School, Uganda. She was given an Award appreciating and recognising her for her good facilitation and for teaching inmates (male prisoners) at the Luzira Upper Prison in Kampala, Uganda. She is a founder of a social enterprise (non-profit) that looks at creating a positive impact and improving communities for better sustainable development. She also volunteers as a Programme Manager at the Smart Girls Foundation Ltd (a non-profit organisation). Ms Nantumbwe has a passion for learning, helping and inspiring people to improve their lives. She also undertakes research and is mostly interested in sustainability and community development. She has participated and presented papers at both local and international conferences. Ms Nantumbwe is looking forward to doing a PhD when she has an opportunity of getting a scholarship.