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Guest Editorial

## Stakeholder engagement: Theoretical and methodological directions for project scholarship

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## A B S T R A C T

In our introduction to this Special Issue on Project Stakeholder Engagement, we emphasize the imperative for a deeper understanding of stakeholder phenomena in the context of temporary organizations. Our argument addresses the growing need for organizational strategies that focus on more inclusive approaches, the moral foundations of stakeholder thinking, and the necessity of considering marginalized groups. Recent debates in management and organizational scholarship have conveyed a key message to organizations: the need for them to contribute to a more cohesive and sustainable world. However, this paradigm shift from stakeholder 'management' to 'engagement' also presents new challenges for (project) organizations as they seek to address and balance the needs and demands of multiple stakeholders. Such approaches require more collaborative and inclusive structures to tackle pressing social issues and to recognize a broader array of stakeholders in value-creation processes. Against this backdrop, the focus of this Special Issue is on advancing theory and evidence related to the nature, aims, processes, and consequences of stakeholder engagement in temporary organizations. We summarize the contributions of each of the six articles that make up this Special Issue, noting in particular their methodological and theoretical diversity. In conclusion, we propose a future research agenda on project stakeholder engagement, inspired by the ideas and insights developed in this Special Issue.

## 1. Introduction

How can stakeholders, whether in favor or opposed to the project, be effectively engaged? How do projects, with their multifaceted impacts on broader society, influence stakeholders and their motivation to be engaged in projects? How do new and more accessible digital communication tools, such as social media, change the overall landscape of stakeholder engagement? How can the dynamics of stakeholder interactions facilitate the creation and exchange of value within the project stakeholder network?

As we extensively discussed in the initial call for this Special Issue (Aaltonen et al., 2021), within the broadly monolithic conceptualization of stakeholders, their engagement and involvement are often under-represented (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019). Stakeholders and their perspectives are frequently studied within a dyadic relationship with the (project) organization (Rowley, 1997), isolated from the impacts of broader society (Eskerod & Larsen, 2018; Lehtinen et al., 2019). Moreover, stakeholder engagement studies often lack the necessary theorization to develop nuanced, pragmatic approaches to stakeholder engagement in diverse project settings. Acknowledging these limitations in stakeholder scholarship which

prevent this stream of research from achieving its potential, we locate stakeholder engagement in a rather broader context of project development. In theorizing project stakeholder engagement, we adopt the conceptualization of projects as 'agents of change' (Locatelli et al., 2023; Turner & Müller, 2003) and as actors pivotal in driving the innovation required to tackle pressing social needs and grand challenges (Aarseth et al., 2017; Ika & Munro, 2022). Thus, a multi-directional relationship between projects, stakeholders, and broader society emerges (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2016; Derakhshan & Turner, 2022; Gil, 2023).

The Special Issue expands on this view of stakeholder engagement, emphasizing a relational perspective where various stakeholders interact with each other, and these relationships shape organizational behavior, identity, and socio-organizational structures, ultimately influencing the success of the project. It asserts that project aims emerge through the engagement, negotiation, and organization of objectives in response to economic, social, technological, and environmental issues across societies, organizations, groups, and individuals. This perspective shifts our view from considering stakeholder engagement as merely one of many processes within projects (Di Maddaloni & Sabini, 2022), to seeing it as a continuous set of activities that shapes and is shaped by the direction and aim of the project (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; Lehtinen

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**Table 1**  
Summary of contributions to the special issue.

Authors	Title	Methodology	Contribution
S., Floricel, and Brunet, M.	Grandstanding? The elusive process of shaping megaproject symbolism	Conceptual	Four types of symbolism are identified impacting stakeholder engagement, their attitudes and mobilization possibilities.
Kroh, J., and Schultz, C	In favor or against: The influence of skeptical stakeholders in urban innovation projects for green transformation	Quantitative - Text mining and survey questionnaire	The involvement of skeptical stakeholders enhances both the innovativeness and implementation intention at the front-end of projects.
Li, Y., Ouyang, L., Zheng, X., Liu, Y., and Zhu, L	Value exchanges within stakeholder networks throughout a megaproject's lifecycle	Mixed-methods - Qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (documents)	Six categories of value flow are identified, showing that engagement between owners and market stakeholders creates the most value during the implementation phase, while engagement between owners and non-market stakeholders generates the most value during the front-end and operation stages.
Naderpajouh, N., Zolghadr, A., and Clegg, S.	Organizing coepetitive tensions: Collaborative consumption in project ecologies	Qualitative - Grounded theory (semi-structured interviews)	Coepetitive tensions shape the nature and extent of multi-stakeholder engagement in project contexts, guiding innovation within supply chains.
Bandé, A., Ika, L. A., and Ouedraogo, S	Beneficiary participation is an imperative, not an option, but does it really work in international development projects?	Quantitative – survey questionnaire	Beneficiary involvement and participation significantly and positively influences both short-term (project management success) and long-term project success (project impact).
Chung, K. S. K., Eskerod, P., Jepsen, A. L., and Zhang, J.	Response strategies for community stakeholder engagement on social media: A case study of a large infrastructure project	Qualitative – Case study and content analysis	Social media, as a communication channel, can be used to empower community stakeholders. It is a powerful tool for stakeholder engagement, particularly due to its ease of access and the high level of transparency it provides.

& Aaltonen, 2020; Lehtinen et al., 2019). Stakeholder engagement is deeply embedded in the past (of the project, of the permanent organization, and of the stakeholders' relationship with these entities) (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2016; Derakhshan & Turner, 2022; Kier et al., 2023) and extends into the future, interwoven with the dynamics of the socio-economic, legal, and political structures of the surrounding environment. The contextual perspective is critical to understanding the processes and practices of project stakeholder engagement in temporary organizations, and yet it has so far received insufficient attention. Consequently, the editorial offers insights and expands our conceptual understanding of the multi-faceted nature of project stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, by suggesting theoretical and methodological directions for future research in stakeholder engagement, we aim to encourage project scholarship to embrace more diverse and contemporary aspects of organizing and managing projects as drivers of change within organizations and broader societies.

## 2. Contributions to the special issue

The articles published in this Special Issue cover a wide range of perspectives on project stakeholder engagement and raise many new questions for future research in the field (Table 1). We also acknowledge and appreciate the methodological plurality of the articles in this Special Issue. The contributions include a conceptual paper, a social media content analysis, an interview-based study, a survey questionnaire, a study combining text mining and survey data, and a sequential mixed-method approach that incorporates document analysis, interviews, and surveys. This methodological diversity, with its emphasis on qualitative and inductive research, is commendable and reflects the broad conceptual and epistemological foundations of stakeholder engagement literature, as well as the expansive debates within the field of project studies. Table 1 presents an overview of the six papers, their methodology, and contributions.

In our call for papers, we highlighted six specific themes relevant to advancing our understanding of stakeholder engagement in the context of projects: the concept and outcomes of project stakeholder engagement, optimizing stakeholder engagement, the network perspective and dynamics of project stakeholder engagement, challenges of multi-stakeholder engagement in projects, engaging institutions and communities, and stakeholder engagement in rarely examined settings and new horizons. We will examine the content of the six articles published in the special issue and situate them within the context of these identified themes.

Floricel and Brunet (2023) draw on the concept of symbolism. Specifically, from a stakeholder engagement perspective, the authors introduce the concept of symbolism in megaprojects as the socially constructed aura of impressions—meanings, emotions, and action propensities—accruing to the project's form and representations beyond their functional roles. They identify four types of symbolism and explain how they may impact stakeholder engagement, their attitudes and mobilization possibilities. *Narrative legitimating symbolism* arises from the megaproject's significant impacts, leading to variable acceptability and reversible trust if connections to abstract goals are seen as speculative, potentially destabilizing power balances through stakeholder coalitions. *Tectonic embedding symbolism* evokes wellbeing or discrimination, fostering lasting acceptance and implicit engagement, with low differentiation in stakeholder paths making antagonist mobilization difficult. *Iconic agitation symbolism* associates projects with strong emotions and values, creating widespread acceptance and emotional trust, easily channeled into mass movements if solidarity is strong. *Spectacular appeal symbolism*, through its form, evokes enjoyment or rejection, resulting in disputed acceptance and weak engagement, making effective mobilization difficult if diverse and stakeholder voices are lost.

This paper specifically addresses the first theme in our call and conceptually expands our understanding of the factors that influence stakeholder engagement and stakeholders' influence behaviors by integrating discussions on symbolism with stakeholder engagement research. In the era of the image and brand economy, the impression perspective is crucial for broadening our understanding of the often-overlooked socio-cognitive, emotional and affective dimensions of stakeholder engagement in the context of projects (Di Maddaloni & Derakhshan, 2023). It also reminds us of the potential unintended and sometimes uncontrollable social phenomena in stakeholder engagement, calling for further research attention to the actualities of managing and controlling such engagement. Moreover, research has long demonstrated that looking through the lenses of impressions, image, labeling, and identities, can also provide new insights into understanding the reasons behind stakeholders' mobilization and collective actions against the project (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003).

Kroh and Schultz (2023) use text mining and survey data derived from 107 publicly funded urban innovation projects in Germany to examine the underexplored impact of engaging with skeptical stakeholders. The results of their analysis suggest that involving skeptical stakeholders enhances both the innovativeness and implementation intention at the front end of urban innovation projects, as these stakeholders help identify the best conceptual solutions. The constructive

opposition of skeptical stakeholders, often due to unaddressed public benefits and project layouts, expands the knowledge base and reduces perceived barriers through shared goals and motivation. The research also exhibits that the successful involvement of skeptical stakeholders depends on high levels of project management resources, moderate formal management, and effective internal and external coordination, highlighting the importance of value-driven stakeholder involvement over governance-based approaches.

In addition to contributing to the research on the often-overlooked group of skeptical stakeholders, who are typically seen as unwanted by project management (Lehtinen et al., 2023), this paper also contributes to the debates on the optimization and operationalization of project stakeholder engagement. In doing so, this research provides contributions to the methods and processes to measure stakeholder engagement in project context. Operationalizing and measuring stakeholder engagement could be a significant concern for (project) organizations that aim to achieve an optimal engagement level in different project contexts and situations (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2024). Furthermore, the findings of this research highlight the value of maintaining ongoing engagement and dialogue, also with those stakeholders who are skeptical. The research highlights such engagement and dialogue is crucial for the long-term value creation in the context of projects. The suggestions provided in this research on how to engage with critical, challenging, neglected, or skeptical stakeholders in a way that promotes continuous learning and development is also highly valuable for project management practitioners.

Li et al. (2024) unfold the crucial role of stakeholder engagement in value creation. They deployed the research in the challenging context of megaprojects through a sequential mixed method approach. Megaproject value is created through networks of multiple stakeholders conducting reciprocal value exchanges, which involve satisfying the diverse needs of stakeholders. Extant literature has discussed the diverse dimensions of value created through the involvement of stakeholders (e.g., Eskerod & Ang, 2017; Gil & Fu, 2022; Harrison & Wicks, 2013; Tantalo & Priem, 2016). Li et al. (2024) extend this stream of research by nuancing the value created through collaboration of project owners and market and nonmarket stakeholders. In doing so, they argue that through collaboration, owners and market stakeholders (especially designers) create the most value during the implementation phase, while collaboration between owners and nonmarket stakeholders (especially governmental bodies) delivers the most value during the front-end and operation stages. The analysis further identifies six categories of value flow: finance, support/opportunity, product/service, policy/regulation, knowledge/information, and communication/evaluation. Among these, communication/evaluation is the most significant for the front-end and operation phases, while support/opportunity is most prominent during the implementation phase.

In addition, the adopted network view of stakeholders, which aligns with the third theme in our call for papers, offers new insights into value exchange in a multi-stakeholder context, previously discussed in extant literature (e.g., Feng, 2013; Hein et al., 2017). Extending the Value Network (SVN) approach (Zheng et al., 2016), which analyzes value exchange between the focal organization and stakeholders, as well as among stakeholders themselves, this paper introduces a Megaproject Stakeholder Value Network (MSVN) to reveal the processes of reciprocal value exchange and how they evolve throughout the megaproject lifecycle. As such, the network perspective and the dynamics of project stakeholder engagement become pivotal in the face of the heightened tendency towards partnership-based approaches of performing projects. These partnership-based approaches are often hybridized through their mixed multi-stakeholder relationships, as well as in the combined economic, social, and environmental goals they pursue (Quélin et al., 2019). Furthermore, the project lifecycle perspective of the paper addresses the dynamics of stakeholder engagement, emphasizing the importance of timing and the temporary processes involved. This contextual lens is crucial for advancing the field, as stakeholder

engagement always occurs within temporal and spatial frames.

Naderpajouh, Zolghadr and Clegg (2024) adopt a grounded theory approach to shed light on organizing cooperative tensions. The authors position resources as the central focus of stakeholder engagement in project ecologies. From this perspective, they study collaborative consumption in construction project ecologies to examine how do tensions among stakeholders arise from contradictory logics of cooperation and competition in such settings. The research reveals how cooperative tensions shape the nature and extent of these interactions among stakeholders, guiding innovation in project supply chains. It also argues how, beyond the limitations of broad strategic collaborations, these innovative interactions promote joint specializations, collective commitments, strategic resource dependencies, and more permeable organizational boundaries. However, the research also emphasizes that organizing these ad-hoc strategic interactions requires additional regulatory frameworks and alternative tools, such as a digital platform for brokering structural holes in information relating to supply and demand.

The concept of multi-stakeholder engagement discussed in this paper is linked to the fourth theme of the call for the Special Issue. The authors used a grounded theory approach to empirically evaluate the nature of the tensions arising from the contradictory logics of cooperation and competition in collaborative consumption settings within project ecologies. In doing so, the paper introduces the concept of cooperative tensions among stakeholders and unveils how cooperative tensions may shape relationships and interactions among stakeholders. The research highlights the multi-faceted nature of interactions and heterogeneous relationships, nuancing the debates on the cooperative relationships (Civera & Freeman, 2019), as well as those on the competitive aspects of these interactions. Delving deeper into the complex and dynamic nature of stakeholder relationships is crucial for developing a profound understanding of stakeholder engagement within the context of projects and project ecologies.

Bandé, Ika and Ouédraogo (2024) conducted a survey questionnaire of 154 projects to highlight the importance of beneficiary engagement in international development projects. The authors focus on beneficiary engagement, or external 'nonmarket' stakeholder engagement, in international development settings. The results of their quantitative study suggest that beneficiary involvement significantly and positively influences both short-term (project management success) and long-term project success (project impact). By involving beneficiaries, projects can address their needs, build trust, and foster positive stakeholder relationships, which are critical success factors throughout the project life cycle. The results of this empirical study suggest that any level of beneficiary engagement—whether involvement or participation—positively impacts project success in both the short and long term. This supports the participatory orthodoxy's message: "whatever you do, engage your beneficiaries; it is always desirable and good for your project." (Bandé et al., 2024)

This research underscores the importance of engaging with nonmarket stakeholders and address the fifth theme of "Engaging institutions and communities" within the unique context of development projects which are typically carried out in highly complex institutional landscapes. This study makes a particular contribution to our understanding of the engagement of less powerful stakeholders, as it empirically explores dynamics of stakeholder engagement in the overlooked context of international development projects. Bandé, Ika and Ouédraogo's (2024) paper enhances our understanding of methodological approaches for measuring the influence of varying levels of beneficiary engagement on different dimensions of project success. Additionally, it provides empirical evidence supporting the positive impact of diverse types and levels of stakeholder engagement on project success and sustainable value creation in development projects.

In an examination of social media's effectiveness as a means of stakeholder engagement, Chung et al. (2023) analyze the communications on Facebook between the project organization and the communities involved with the Western Sydney International Airport project.

The authors recognize the positive aspects of using social media for stakeholder engagement, particularly due to its ease of access and the high level of transparency it offers. However, their analysis also highlights the limitations of relying solely on social media for this purpose. These limitations impact various dimensions of stakeholder engagement, including stakeholder identification, assessment, and response strategies. For instance, regarding stakeholder identification, the authors found that limited information about stakeholders on social media makes it challenging for the project organization to compile a comprehensive list of stakeholders as individuals or groups. To address this, the research suggests that the project organization should focus on identifying issues of stakeholder concern or interest rather than identifying the stakeholders themselves. Additionally, to better manage which opinions on social media gain prominence, organizations should act more proactively by acknowledging stakeholders' contributions, sentiments, and knowledge, such as by liking their posts or responding with a simple 'thank you'.

This paper's focus on stakeholder engagement in social media aligns with the final theme in our call, titled "Stakeholder engagement in settings that are rarely examined and new horizons". The rapid development of digital technologies, (today particularly generative AI-driven tools), has introduced new channels and platforms for project stakeholder engagement, an area that has been largely uncharted in research. Through the in-depth insights provided by the case study approach, the study further enhances our understanding of the development of relationships with a specific and heterogeneous group of stakeholders: community stakeholders. In doing so, the study nuances our knowledge of dynamics of project organizations interacting with local communities, as well as the challenges of stakeholder interaction in digital spaces. The proposed issue-based perspective is especially relevant for ensuring that diverse concerns and weaker voices are more effectively heard in the context of social media, rather than focusing too heavily on the comprehensive identification of stakeholder groups.

### 3. Future research in project stakeholder engagement

Despite the extensive scholarship on (project) stakeholder engagement, ongoing research in this field remains crucial. That is mainly because the increasingly complex and dynamic nature of projects (Bakhshi et al., 2016), evolving global and societal challenges surrounding the projects (Ika & Munro, 2022; Locatelli et al., 2023), and advancements in technology continually reshape the landscape of stakeholder interactions (Castelló & Lopez-Berzosa, 2023). While, with no doubt, significant progress has been made in understanding the fundamentals of stakeholder engagement, new complexities and opportunities emerge that demand further exploration of stakeholder engagement (Kujala et al., 2022). Besides what we proposed under Potential Topics, in the initial call of this Special Issue (Aaltonen et al., 2021), below, we outline some further theoretical and methodological suggestions for future studies inspired by the ideas and contributions of this special issue that can advance our understanding and practice of project stakeholder engagement (Table 2).

#### *Incorporating stakeholder voices*

So far, the rich and extensive research on stakeholder, in general, and stakeholder engagement, in particular, has been mainly focused on reflecting the voice of the organizations and management and thus provides an unbalanced view of how stakeholders perceive organizations' aim and activities in that regard (Derakhshan et al., 2019; Vuorinen & Martinsuo, 2019). In other words, the story of project stakeholder engagement is still very much the story of those who have power in projects 'to engage'. Viewing the project from the perspective of multiple stakeholders' needs and expectations and how they become and are becoming engaged helps to appreciate the dialog, mutual respect and reciprocity that constitutes the essence of stakeholder engagement and is particularly relevant in the context of wicked problems that grand challenges of today are.

While the focus on project organization offers valuable insights into the organization and planning for stakeholder engagement (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018; Silvius & Schipper, 2019), a more comprehensive understanding requires nuanced knowledge from a more diverse set of actors and stakeholders involved in, and impacted by, engagement activities. Future studies should emphasize including the voices of stakeholders, rather than predominantly focusing on the perspectives of project organizations. This approach involves capturing the experiences, expectations, wants, feedback and even emotions of various stakeholders involved in the project (Barney, 2018; Derakhshan & Turner, 2022; Miles, 2017). Our suggestion here speaks to our relational view of stakeholder engagement, where we allude that a thorough stakeholder engagement, and arguably theorizing and practically planning for that, can be conducted only when the voice of all involved actors of the stakeholder network is incorporated. Understanding these diverse viewpoints can help identify areas for improvement in the aim, activities and impact of stakeholder engagement, enhance engagement practices, and ensure that stakeholder needs and concerns are adequately addressed throughout the project lifecycle. Better understanding is also needed on how and why some project stakeholders may become unengaged, lose commitment or remain and be kept silent over the project lifecycle and how this may relate to the dynamics of engagement activities enacted in projects. This also requires a better understanding of the project practitioners' inability of identifying stakeholders and their voices and the acknowledgement of the managerial complexity that is caused by the diversity of stakeholder perceptions, voices and perspectives (Di Maddaloni & Derakhshan, 2023). Finally, critical perspectives on both project organizations' and stakeholders' motives, problematic purposes and potentially destructive activities have been largely missing in literature calling for more research on the dark side of stakeholder engagement.

#### *Multi-stakeholder engagement and grand challenges*

We also suggest that there is a compelling and timely opportunity for research at the intersection of stakeholder engagement and grand challenges (Ika & Munro, 2022). This area of study is particularly significant as it addresses how multi-stakeholder engagement can be leveraged to tackle some of the most pressing global issues, such as climate change, sustainable development (Aarseth et al., 2017), social justice (Begg, 2018; Lukasiewicz & Baldwin, 2017) and inequality (Adam Cobb, 2016; Dawkins, 2015). By focusing on this intersection, researchers can uncover how effective stakeholder engagement strategies can contribute to innovative solutions, enhance collaborative efforts, and drive meaningful change on a global scale. Future research should explore how diverse stakeholder groups, including marginalized and underrepresented communities, local governments or not-for-profit organizations can be actively involved in addressing these grand challenges. Moreover, research may explore how individuals, groups and communities affected by these grand challenges can be actively engaged in broader project activities, as well as the projects designed to tackle such challenges. At the same time, more research is also needed on the challenges and even potentially negative and paralysing consequences of engaging too many or over-engaging stakeholders when solving wicked issues (Milio, 2014; Schmitt, 2010). Accomplishing stakeholder alignment in the challenging context of grand challenges also requires a recalibration and a new understanding of the roles different public, private, and nonprofit actors play in their collaboration, and specifically how actors from each sector react to the interaction of multiple influences from the entire stakeholder set (Rowley, 1997), in order to organize and deliver outcomes (George et al., 2022; Lazzarini, 2022).

By investigating these aspects, researchers can provide valuable insights into the best practices for engaging stakeholders in complex, multi-dimensional problems. As such, while researchers have noted that business-government interactions require and shape new forms of governance in addressing pressing social needs (Levy, 2021), future research is needed to conceptualize and explain the contexts, contingencies, and impacts of these new relationships (Gond et al., 2024), in



**Table 2**  
Suggestions for future research in project stakeholder engagement.

Aspect	Research Focus	Proposed Key Questions	Methodological Suggestions	Expected Contributions
Incorporating Stakeholder Voices	- Reflect the perspectives of all stakeholders, not just project organizations.	- How can stakeholder experiences and expectations be integrated into project processes?	- Ethnographic studies to capture the lived experiences of stakeholders.	- More balanced and relational understanding of stakeholder engagement.
	- Understand stakeholder disengagement and silence.	- What causes disengagement or silence among stakeholders?	- Qualitative and longitudinal approaches to track dynamics over time.	- Identification of gaps in engagement practices.
	- Focus on diversity of perceptions and voices.	- How do stakeholder perceptions affect project outcomes?		
Multi-Stakeholder Engagement and Grand Challenges	- Investigate how multi-stakeholder engagement addresses grand challenges (e.g., climate change, inequality).	- How do diverse stakeholders collaborate to address global challenges?	- Comparative research on stakeholder engagement in various sectors (public, private, non-profit).	- Frameworks for addressing complex global challenges through stakeholder engagement.
	- Explore the risks of over-engagement.	- What are the risks of over-engagement?		- Understanding of engagement risks in wicked issues.
Inclusion of Marginalized Stakeholders	- Investigate barriers to participation for marginalized stakeholders.	- How can marginalized stakeholders be meaningfully included?	- Ethnographic research focusing on marginalized stakeholder inclusion.	- Improve fairness and inclusivity in stakeholder engagement.
	- Examine conflicts arising from engaging diverse marginalized groups.	- What barriers prevent their participation?	- Participatory action research to directly involve marginalized groups.	- Address participation barriers and conflicts among marginalized groups.
		- How can conflicts between diverse marginalized groups be addressed?		
Stakeholder Co-Creation and Future-Making	- Explore how stakeholders co-create solutions and shape future visions.	- How do diverse stakeholders contribute to future-making and sustainability?	- Studies on co-creation practices involving diverse stakeholders.	- Insights into how co-creation can influence long-term project outcomes.
	- Investigate power dynamics in co-creation and the role of marginalized groups.	- How do power dynamics shape co-creation practices?	- Longitudinal and case-based approaches to examine how solutions evolve over time.	- A deeper understanding of the role of marginalized voices in future-making.
Diverse and Innovative Methodological Approaches	- Embrace diverse research methods (qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods).	- How can various methods contribute to a more holistic understanding of stakeholder engagement?	- Ethnographic and longitudinal studies.	- Uncover new dimensions of stakeholder engagement and address methodological gaps.
	- Use ethnography to understand stakeholders' lived experiences.		- Social network analysis and advanced data analytics.	
Novel Contexts and Channels for Stakeholder Engagement	- Explore how digital tools like social media and AI impact stakeholder engagement.	- How do social media and AI influence stakeholder engagement?	- Analyze the use of AI and social media for stakeholder engagement.	- Advance knowledge on digital tools and their role in stakeholder engagement.
	- Understand new opportunities and risks from these technologies.	- What are the risks and benefits of using these tools in engagement practices?	- Study the impact of digital communication on engagement practices.	- Advance understanding of the potential roles of AI applications in facilitating multi-stakeholder negotiations and engagement.

the context of grand challenges more comprehensively. This research can ultimately help to develop more resilient and adaptive engagement frameworks that not only address immediate project goals but also contribute to long-term societal benefits and the achievement of global sustainability targets.

#### *Inclusion of marginalized stakeholders*

It is essential to investigate how stakeholder engagement practices can be more inclusive of marginalized, less powerful and underrepresented groups. Marginalized stakeholders often include individuals and communities who lack significant economic, social, or political power (Derry, 2012; Derakhshan & Chowdhury, 2024). They can be found in various contexts, such as the Global South, where marginalized groups might include low-income communities, indigenous populations, women, and ethnic minorities. In many developing or developed countries, these stakeholders often face systemic barriers to participation in development projects and decision-making processes (Chowdhury et al., 2024). Large-scale international projects, such as infrastructure developments or multinational corporate initiatives, frequently impact marginalized communities. These projects may affect local residents, small businesses, or informal workers who do not have a strong voice in project planning and implementation (Derakhshan, 2022). International supply chains are another context where marginalized stakeholders can be found (Derry, 2012; Soundararajan et al., 2019). Workers in low-wage and precarious employment, can be overlooked in stakeholder engagement processes, despite being directly

affected by corporate practices and policies (Alzoubi et al., 2024).

Future research should focus on identifying barriers to participation for these stakeholders in projects and developing strategies to overcome them. Understanding better also the processes related to the marginalization, labelling and stereotyping of project stakeholders would also be crucial for the identification of the experienced barriers to participation. Understanding the unique challenges faced by these groups and implementing strategies to include them meaningfully in engagement processes will enhance the overall effectiveness and fairness of stakeholder interactions, contributing to better project outcomes and greater social justice. More research is also needed on the difficulties and conflicts that may arise when diverse marginalized groups with potentially clashing cultures and pluralistic logics are being engaged.

#### *Stakeholder co-creation and future-making*

Another promising avenue for future research lies at the intersection of stakeholder co-creation and future-making, particularly in the context of addressing grand challenges. Stakeholder co-creation refers to collaborative processes where various actors—public, private, civil society, and marginalized groups—actively participate in shaping not only the design and implementation of solutions but also the long-term vision for the future (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2004). From this perspective, future-making involves not just reacting to current problems but collectively envisioning and constructing desirable futures through concerted stakeholder efforts (Miller, 2018). When viewed from the perspective of temporary project organizations, significant boundary

spanning efforts are required from project practitioners to engage a variety of stakeholders to co-create value in making organizational futures (Kier et al., 2023).

Exploring how diverse stakeholders can co-create solutions is crucial, particularly in contexts where complex and systemic issues such as climate change, global inequality, or public health crises require innovative approaches (Bammer, 2019; Jones, 2018; Loureiro, Romero & Bilro, 2020). Future research could investigate how co-creation practices enable stakeholders to contribute knowledge, resources, and unique perspectives towards designing forward-looking strategies that promote sustainability and resilience. Moreover, studies should focus on how these co-created visions of the future are shaped by the power dynamics among stakeholders, especially considering how historically underrepresented voices—such as indigenous communities, grassroots organizations, or local municipalities—can play a pivotal role in shaping sustainable and equitable futures (Chowdhury, Sarasvathy & Freeman, 2024).

Additionally, future-making through stakeholder co-creation presents an opportunity to reimagine governance models and institutional frameworks. Future research can explore how co-creation processes taking place in project contexts may redefine the relationships between stakeholders across sectors, and how this collaborative work influences long-term project outcomes. This approach might entail understanding how stakeholders navigate uncertainties, trade-offs, and conflicts when setting future agendas, while also investigating how co-created solutions adapt over time in the face of unforeseen challenges.

An important consideration for future research is also the potential tensions and barriers that arise from co-creation in multi-stakeholder settings. Investigating how to manage and mitigate these challenges—whether related to conflicting interests, resource imbalances, or power asymmetries—could provide insights into more inclusive and equitable co-creation practices. Here, the potential of large language model (LLM)-based tools to act as mediators and help stakeholders find common ground is a promising avenue for future research. Moreover, understanding the mechanisms that allow for the scaling and institutionalization of co-created solutions across different levels (local, national, global) could help translate these collaborative efforts at the project level into broader societal impact.

#### *Diverse and innovative methodological approaches*

Studying new contexts and incorporating new voices necessitates adapting our research approaches to include more diverse methods. Future studies should embrace diverse methodological approaches to researching stakeholder engagement. This includes combining qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods research to gain a holistic understanding of engagement practices. Ethnography, for instance, would allow capturing the complexity of everyday life by getting “into the head” of stakeholder individuals in relation to a project (Watson, 2011, p.202) and enable a deeper understanding on the socio-cognitive and affective processes of stakeholders and their lived experiences. Furthermore, ethnographic approaches may help to understand better the sensemaking processes of managers related to stakeholders and how these may affect the unfolding of stakeholder engagement activities over the project lifecycle.

Considering the breadth and depth of multi-stakeholder engagement, longitudinal analyses would allow a concerted attempt to “undertake research that focuses on a broad array of...variables” (Miller & Friesen, 1982, p.1013) and increase understanding of iterative nature of stakeholder engagement processes and the act of engaging stakeholders. Social network analysis (Zheng et al., 2016), and advanced data analytics can provide deeper insights into the complexities of stakeholder interactions. By leveraging a wide range of research methods, project management scholars can uncover new dimensions of stakeholder engagement, address methodological gaps, and enhance the robustness and applicability of their findings across different project contexts.

#### *Novel contexts and channels for stakeholder engagement*

With the rise of digital communication tools, it is essential to explore

and advance our understanding on how technologies such as social media and collaboration platforms can impact project stakeholder engagement and even help to develop and foster more meaningful and deeper stakeholder connections. The influence of social media on facilitating real-time communication, fostering transparency, and improving stakeholder participation in a more inclusive manner has been highlighted in various organizational settings (e.g. De Luca et al., 2022; Khanal et al., 2021; Xu & Saxton, 2019) and even put under scrutiny (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2024), addressing diverse objectives for which organizations might employ these tools to engage with their stakeholders. What remains underexplored are the nuances of implementing these tools for effective stakeholder engagement throughout the various stages of the project lifecycle. Questions such as how content on social media can be framed to engage stakeholders? What risks are associated with using social media for stakeholder engagement? How engagement through social media can be aligned and integrated with other communication and engagement methods and how these engagements are perceived by their targets (i.e., stakeholders) are crucial areas that need further investigation?

The development of generative AI will undoubtedly offer various new spaces for stakeholder engagement possibilities for groundbreaking stakeholder engagement research. New knowledge is needed for example on how generative AI -powered solutions can be used for moderating, mediating and supporting the engagement of multiple stakeholders and facilitating multi-stakeholder co-creation and future-making processes, how they may support the identification and inclusion of marginalized stakeholders' demands and how such tools can be used responsibly in the context of stakeholder engagement.

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