

Examining Stakeholders Participation in Public Projects: An Assessment of Engagement Structures and Strategies in Bayelsa State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Stakeholder participation is integral to the success and sustainability of public projects, particularly in resource-rich but conflict-prone regions such as Nigeria's Niger Delta regions facing governance and development challenges. While citing development projects is one thing, having locals participate in and own up public project is another. This study examines the effectiveness of existing engagement structures, stakeholders' (un)willingness to participate in, and the barriers limiting inclusive decision-making in public projects. What factors influence stakeholders' (un)willingness to participate in public projects? How effective are the current stakeholder engagement structures and strategies, if any? What measures can enhance stakeholder participation and improve project sustainability? The study is anchored in Palaver Tree Model of Citizen Participation, providing a theoretical framework to analyse levels of engagement, power dynamics, and the prioritisation of stakeholder interests. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the research utilises surveys, and document analysis to collect data from government agencies, community representatives, and private sector actors involved in public projects. Analysis of empirical data reveals critical gaps, including inadequate communication frameworks, lack of transparency in contractor selection, delays in government disbursement of funds, and insufficient community cooperation. Findings indicate that while local involvement

enhances project success, weak participatory mechanisms and stakeholder exclusion contribute to implementation failures. The study highlights the need for institutionalised participatory governance, improved grievance redress mechanisms, and targeted inclusion of marginalised groups, particularly women and youth. While underscoring the imperative of integrating traditional leaders, civil society organizations, and local institutions into project planning and monitoring to foster trust, accountability, and sustainable development outcomes, the study concludes with policy recommendations emphasising transparent procurement processes, enhanced community capacity-building initiatives, and collaborative governance models as essential for fostering long-term stakeholder engagement to ensure public projects' sustainability.

Keywords: *Public projects, stakeholders' participation, engagement, sustainability, Bayelsa state*

Introduction

Stakeholder participation is a fundamental aspect of public project implementation, influencing both project success and sustainability. In developing nations like Nigeria, particularly in the Niger Delta region, the exclusion of key stakeholders from decision-making processes has often led to inefficiencies, conflicts, and project abandonment (Ibaba, 2007; Itu and Atiye, 2024). Public infrastructure projects, including water supply, road construction, and environmental remediation initiatives, require inclusive engagement strategies to foster local ownership, enhance transparency, and ensure long-term viability. However, evidence suggests that many government-led projects in Nigeria suffer from inadequate stakeholder consultation, weak communication structures, and a lack of trust between the government and local communities (Pimbert and Barry, 2021; Osei-Kyei and Chan, 2017). Stakeholder engagement is a pivotal element in the successful implementation and sustainability of public projects, particularly in regions characterised by complex socio-political dynamics and developmental challenges.

The Niger Delta, despite being a resource-rich region, has faced significant developmental challenges due to historical marginalisation, environmental degradation, and poor governance structures (Adomokai and Sheate, 2004). This region has long been a focal point for oil exploration and production, activities that have significantly impacted the environmental, economic, and social fabric of the region. Several studies have highlighted that the failure of public projects in the region is largely attributable to limited stakeholder involvement, ineffective grievance redress mechanisms, and a lack of transparency in project execution (Waris et al., 2022; Osei-Kyei and Chan, 2017). In Bayelsa State, as with much of Niger Delta, the intricate interplay between government agencies, multinational oil corporations, and local communities has historically influenced the trajectory of public projects. Effective stakeholder participation is essential not only for fostering community ownership but also for ensuring that projects align with the genuine needs and aspirations of the local populace.

Communities in Bayelsa State have often experienced adverse effects such as environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods, and socio-economic marginalisation. These challenges have been exacerbated by instances where public projects are conceived and executed without adequate consultation and involvement of local stakeholders, leading to resistance, project abandonment, and a general lack of sustainability. The Solar Water Plant Project in Sagbama, initiated by the Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) through the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) initiative, serves as a case study for examining these issues. While the project was technically sound and fulfilled its immediate objective of providing potable water, its long-term sustainability

remains uncertain due to insufficient community engagement and inadequate participatory frameworks.

In response to these challenges, there is a growing recognition of the need for concerns to promote stakeholder engagement that prioritise inclusivity, dialogue, and consensus-building. This study examines the factors influencing stakeholders' willingness to participate in public projects in Bayelsa State, evaluate the effectiveness of existing engagement structures and strategies, and explore for appropriate methods to enhance stakeholder involvement and improve the sustainability of public projects. This paper is organised into five sections, following this introduction: conceptualisation, stakeholder engagement in public projects, method, data presentation, analysis and discussion, and conclusion and recommendation. The first, introductory section, lays out the focus and direction of the study. The second section situates the study in Palaver Tree Model, which emphasises the importance of citizens participation as quintessential to public project conception, execution, ownership and sustainability. The third section briefly examine literature related to the study, while the fourth section addresses the methodological issues of the study. The fifth section concerns itself with data presentation, interpretation, and analysis, while the sixth section concludes the study, with concerns for factors worthy of consideration to improve public project performance and sustainability.

Conceptual Contextualisation

The study is anchored in Palaver Tree Model of Citizen Participation, a governance model with origins in West African societies where communal dialogue forms the core of decision-making, conflict resolution, and governance. Here, dialogue, as opposed to monologue, plays a fundamental role in determining what comes out as public decision, concern, and or project. “Palaver Tree” derives from “palaver”, suggesting problem and, “tree”, representing ‘large space’ akin to the shade of large trees such as the baobab or iroko. Taken together, palaver tree refers to a large space, originally under a tree, under which village elders, community leaders, and citizens gather to discuss pressing social, economic, and political issues.

This indigenous system of participatory governance is deeply rooted in African cosmology and manifest in her communalistic and oral tradition, which prioritise consensus-building, collective decision-making, cooperation, and social harmony over and above competitive and anomic individualism. The Palaver Tree approach fosters direct deliberation where every community member has the opportunity to contribute. Distilled from the thoughts of eminent Africans such as Kwasi Wiredu, Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, Chinua Achebe, and Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Palaver Tree espouses inclusivity, deliberative consensus, accountability and social responsibility as core principles of Africa’s cosmos through ages, and necessary to revitalise in the face of challenging present. The contention is that this system has been in use in ancient Africa in governance and continues to influence democratic participation in contemporary African societies, particularly in conflict resolution, local governance, and community development initiatives.

Appropriating this model of thinking provides a culturally relevant theoretical foundation for examining stakeholder participation in public projects in Bayelsa State. Given the communal nature of local governance in many African societies, applying this framework can help in understanding factors influencing stakeholder willingness to participate. The model underscores the importance of inclusive deliberation, suggesting that stakeholders may be more willing to engage in public projects when decision-making processes are transparent, participatory, and culturally familiar. Thus, by assessing how well these structures incorporate elements of the

Palaver Tree model such as direct dialogue and consensus-building, the study can evaluate their effectiveness in fostering meaningful stakeholder involvement.

Stakeholder Engagement in Public Projects

Stakeholder engagement is widely recognised as a critical determinant of project success, particularly in public sector initiatives. Effective engagement ensures that the perspectives, needs, and concerns of all relevant parties are considered, thereby enhancing project legitimacy, reducing conflicts, and fostering community ownership (Ewata et al., 2024; Itu and Atiye, 2023; Waris et al., 2022). Similar notion on the imperatives of stakeholders' engagement is that it brings to the fore and addresses issues of different viewpoints, conflicting interests, and improves public trust and transparency in the conception and management of public affairs (Njue et al., 2021; Ewata et al., 2024).

Stakeholders comprise a diverse array of individuals and groups, each with distinct interests and levels of influence. These interests can encompass economic concerns, social change, environmental impact, physical and mental health, safety, and security. Effectively identifying and understanding these stakeholders is crucial for successful public project management. Stakeholders in public projects are broadly categorised into internal and external groups. Internal stakeholders, on the one hand, operate within an organisation and encompasses its employees, including managers who are directly involved in the project's execution and oversight (Winch, 2012; Waris et al., 2022). External stakeholders, on the other hand, are entities operating outside the organisation affected by or capable of affecting the project's outcome, such as citizens as beneficiaries, local communities, and government agencies and officials linked in one way or another to the project (Winch, 2012; Rabinowitz, 2024). Further classification distinguishes between primary stakeholders – those directly impacted by the project, and secondary stakeholders – those indirectly affected. Key stakeholders often encompass government officials and policymakers, media representatives, influential community figures, community leaders, and investors, all of whom possess substantial influence over the project's direction and success (Ewata et al., 2024; Rabinowitz, 2024; Zaichenko, 2024; Johnivan, 2023). Understanding these classifications aids in developing tailored engagement strategies to address stakeholders' diverse needs and concerns, thereby enhancing project outcomes and fostering sustainable development. In the context of Bayelsa State, several studies have examined the dynamics of stakeholder engagement and its impact on project outcomes. Itu and Atiye (2023) examined the community relation strategies of Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC) and their influence on sustainable development in Bayelsa State. The study revealed that despite SPDC's efforts in initiating development projects such as scholarships, health centers, and infrastructure, these initiatives often lacked sustainability and failed to mitigate the negative consequences of oil exploration, including environmental pollution and unemployment. The authors recommended that both the government and SPDC implement capacity-building programs and ensure full community engagement in project planning and execution to foster peace and sustainable development. This finding aligns with broader research indicating that oil companies' community engagement strategies in the Niger Delta have frequently fallen short of achieving sustainable development. Adeyeye and Adekeye (2022) observed that SPDC's corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices in the region have been marked by deep frustrations due to inappropriate and ineffective stakeholder engagement. They highlighted that inadequate involvement of stakeholders in CSR agendas has led to repeated deprivations for host communities, emphasising the need for designing best practices for sustainable stakeholder engagement.

Similarly, research by Okringbo, Chukuigwe, and Sikpi (2022) assessed the effectiveness of SPDC's communication strategies in promoting environmental degradation management in the Niger Delta. Their study found that while SPDC implemented various environmental management interventions, the communication strategies employed were not sufficiently effective in fostering community awareness and participation. The authors recommended enhancing communication approaches to improve community engagement in environmental management efforts. Furthermore, a study by Itu (2024) examined the CSR initiatives of SPDC and Nigeria AGIP Oil Company (NAOC) in Bayelsa State, revealing a significant relationship between the level of host community participation and the socio-economic impact of CSR activities. The research emphasized the importance of adhering to the Global Memorandum of Understanding (GMOU), implementing capacity-building programs, and ensuring full public participation by host communities to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

These studies collectively underscore the critical importance of genuine community engagement and sustainable practices in development initiatives in the Niger Delta. They highlight the need for development initiatives and programs to move beyond superficial community development projects and address the underlying socio-economic and environmental challenges faced by host communities. Implementing comprehensive capacity-building programs and fostering inclusive participation in project planning and execution are essential steps toward achieving sustainable development and mitigating the adverse impacts of oil exploration in the region. The importance of inclusive stakeholder engagement is further underscored by the initiatives of organisations like the Stakeholders Democracy Network (SDN). In partnership with local entities, SDN organised workshops aimed at strengthening citizens' participation in environmental policy formulation and accountability across 46 communities in Bayelsa State. These workshops emphasised the establishment of community-based groups to work closely with state advocacy and monitoring bodies, highlighting the critical role of grassroots involvement in policy development and implementation.

Method

This study adopts purposive sampling technique to quantitatively survey stakeholders, to assess participation in public projects in Nigeria, with a specific focus on Bayelsa State. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed to community members, project beneficiaries, local leaders, contractors, and government officials as stakeholders in the Solar Water Plant Project in Sagbama. With a sample population of 40 respondents, corresponding to “contractors – 8, local government officials – 8, community leaders – 12, and CBO representatives – 12, representing 20%, 20%, 30%, and 30% respectively” (Ewata et al., 2024: 94). The survey utilised a 4-point Likert scale to measure awareness, engagement levels, perceived transparency, and stakeholder satisfaction with the project implementation.

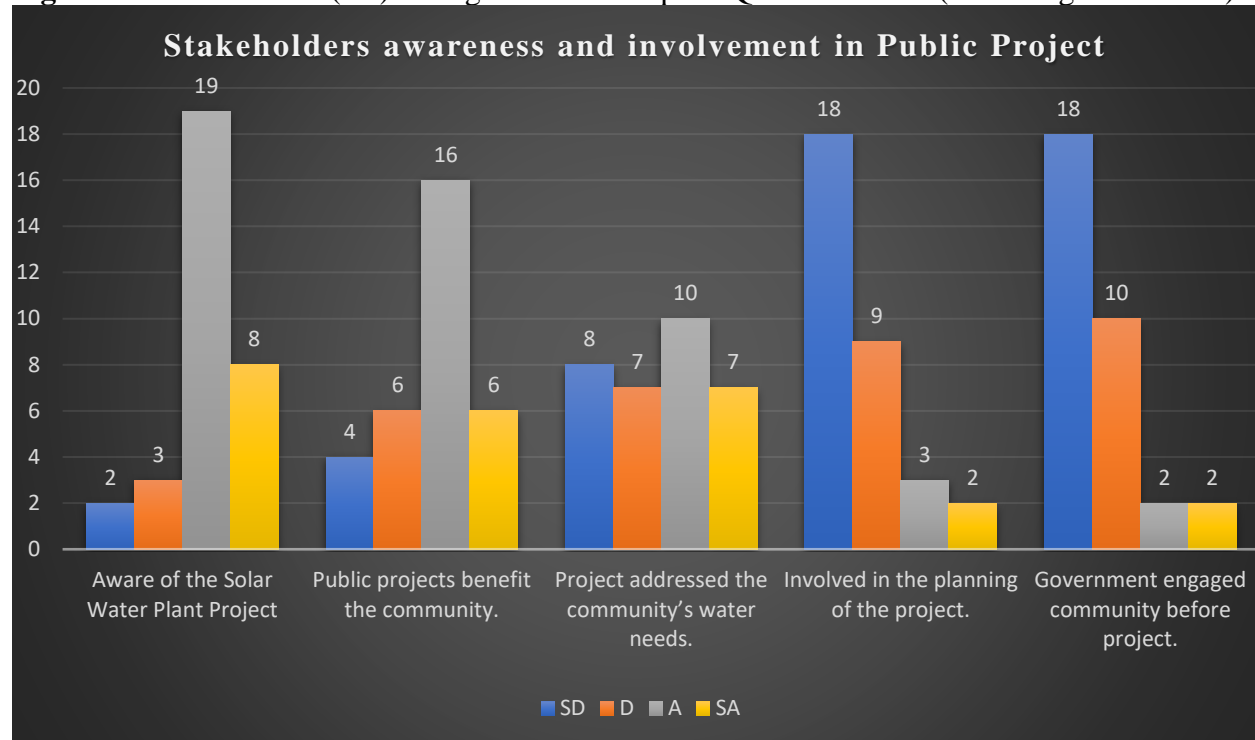
The study also incorporated secondary data from scholarly articles, government reports, and policy documents to contextualize findings and validate conclusions. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics to determine stakeholder willingness to participate, the effectiveness of engagement structures, and transparency in project implementation. Qualitative data were thematically analysed to identify recurring patterns in stakeholder concerns, perceptions of governance, and recommendations for improving participation. The results were further interpreted in relation to existing literature on participatory development, governance, and stakeholder management in Nigeria. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder participation dynamics, providing evidence-based recommendations

for enhancing community engagement, transparency, and project sustainability in the Niger Delta and beyond.

Data Presentation, Analysis, and Discussion

This section concerns itself with data presentation, interpretation, and analysis. Data are presented graphically, with the first four graphs each having five questions while the fifth has six questions. The former reflects questions addressed to all stakeholders, with the exception of contractors while the latter is exclusive to contractors. What follows is the graphical presentation of the findings of the study, and discussion of the findings.

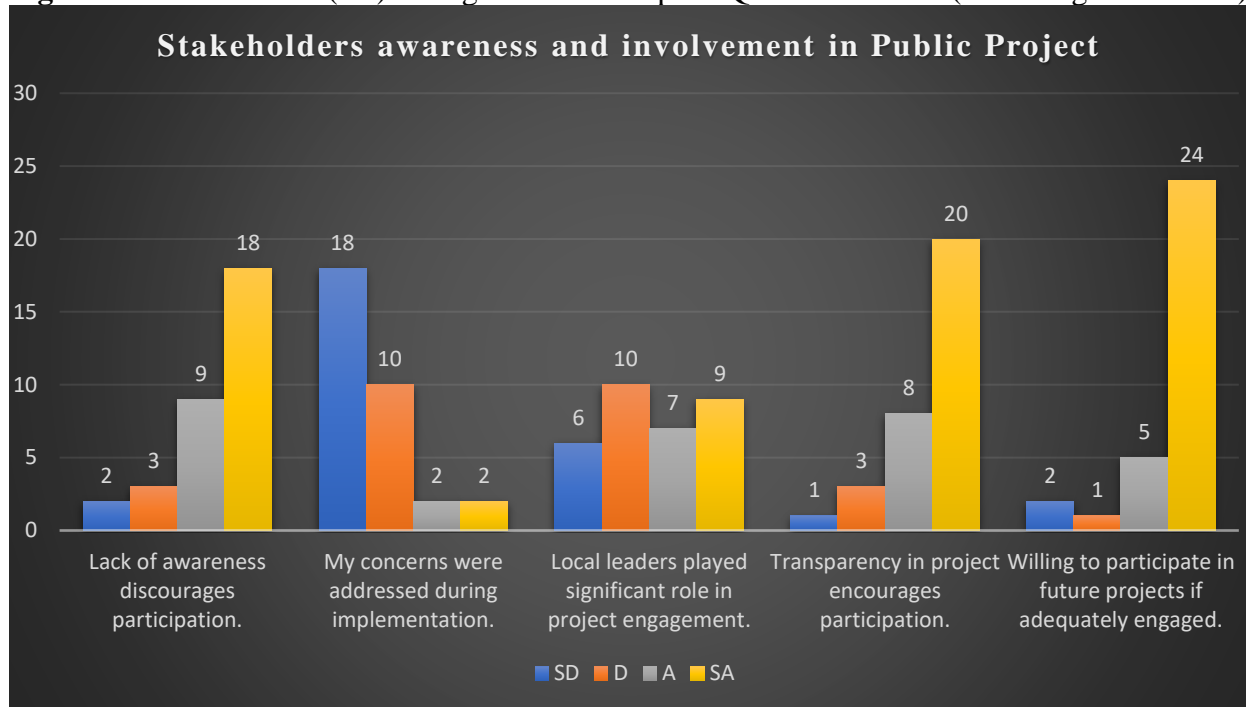
Figure 4.1: Stakeholder (Un)willingness to Participate. Questions 1 – 5 (excluding contractors)



Source: Field Survey, 2024

The graph shows significant insights into stakeholder engagement in public projects in Bayelsa State in terms of awareness of public projects and or participation in execution and management. While 75% of respondents were aware of the Solar Water Plant Project in Sagbama, participation in its planning phase was extremely low, with only 13.9% involved. This suggests a top-down approach to project implementation, where community members are largely excluded from decision-making. Although 61.1% believed public projects generally benefit the community, only 47.2% agreed that the project adequately addressed their water needs, indicating a disconnect between project design and local priorities.

Figure 4.2: Stakeholder (Un)willingness to Participate. Questions 6 – 10 (excluding contractors)



Source: Field Survey, 2024

Furthermore, 77.8% of respondents disagreed that the government engaged the community before the project launch, reinforcing concerns about ineffective stakeholder consultation. Similarly, 77.8% felt their concerns were not addressed during implementation, highlighting weaknesses in feedback and grievance redress mechanisms. The role of local leaders in engagement received mixed responses, with 44.4% acknowledging their contribution, while an equal percentage felt they were not significantly involved. Transparency emerged as a key factor in stakeholder participation, as 77.8% agreed that open and accountable project management encourages involvement. Notably, despite the shortcomings in engagement, an overwhelming 80.6% expressed willingness to participate in future public projects if adequately engaged, signaling a strong potential for improving community involvement through better communication, transparency, and participatory planning.

Discussion of Findings

The high awareness (75%) of the Solar Water Plant Project suggests strong community exposure, yet low involvement in the planning phase (only 13.9% agreed or strongly agreed) indicates exclusion of key stakeholders. This aligns with Obeta (2023), who found that poor participatory planning discourages community ownership of public projects in the Niger Delta. Despite 61.1% believing public projects benefit the community, only 47.2% felt the project addressed their water needs. This suggests that while public projects are perceived as beneficial, they often fail to meet specific community needs. As Oviasuyi and Uwadiae (2023) argue, stakeholder dissatisfaction with projects arises when they are not tailored to local contexts. Furthermore, 76.4% of respondents agree that lack of awareness discourages participation, reinforcing the idea that poor communication reduces stakeholder involvement in public projects across Southern Nigeria. However, 80.6% expressed willingness to participate in future projects if adequately engaged,

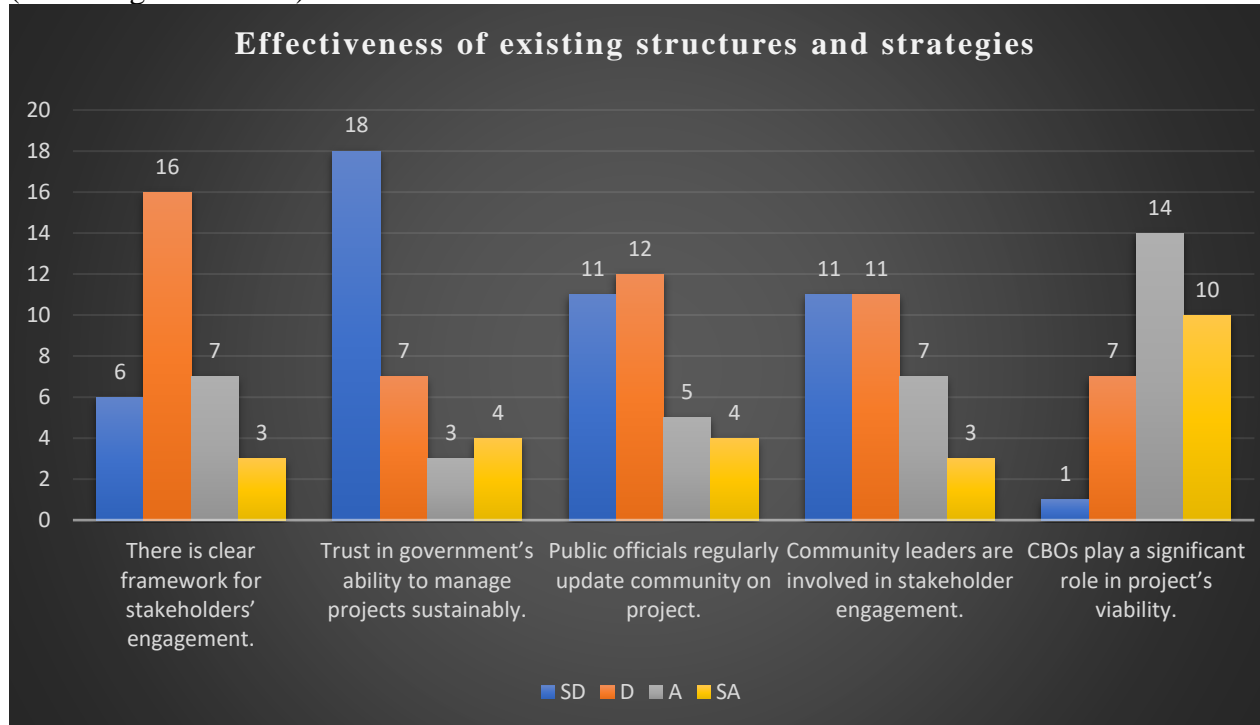
meaning that improving engagement mechanisms could significantly increase community involvement in sustainable development initiatives.

The high disagreement (77.8%) regarding government engagement before project launch reveals ineffectiveness in current participatory structures. This aligns with Ibaba (2007) contention that a major challenge to the already precarious situation in the Niger Delta is that government-led projects often exclude local voices, leading to project failure. Similarly, with a paltry 11.2% convinced their concerns were adequately addressed, reflects the lack of a functional grievance redress mechanism. According to Ozor and Nkwonta (2023), ineffective feedback loops in public projects cause dissatisfaction and stakeholder withdrawal.

That notwithstanding, the role of local leaders in engagement is mixed, with 44.4% agreeing that they played a significant role, while 44.5% disagreed. This suggests inconsistent involvement of traditional rulers, reinforcing Nnaji (2023), who found that while community leadership is essential in participatory governance, it is often undermined by political interference. Encouragingly, 77.8% affirmed that transparency fosters participation, meaning that accountability mechanisms could enhance trust. The contention is that project transparency increases community willingness to collaborate with the government in the Niger Delta.

Thus, to enhance stakeholder participation in public projects, several strategies could be considered, considering that 80.6% of respondents expressed willingness to participate if adequately engaged. Inclusive planning and consultation are essential, as stakeholder mapping could ensure the active involvement of residents, local leaders, and NGOs from the project's inception. Researches have emphasised that participatory development fosters local ownership and improves project sustainability, and that improved communication strategies are necessary, given that 76.4% agree that lack of awareness discourages participation (Ewata et al., 20224). Here, the government could leverage local media, town hall meetings, and community liaisons to bridge the communication gap, since effective information dissemination have been identified as strengthening stakeholder engagement (*ibid.*). Furthermore, transparency and accountability mechanisms need be strengthened, as 77.8% of respondents believe transparency encourages participation, noting that open budget discussions, project tracking systems, and independent oversight combines to build trust in public government's activities, reinforcing the notion that transparent governance improves public trust in development projects (Ibaba, 2007; Rabinowitz, 2024).

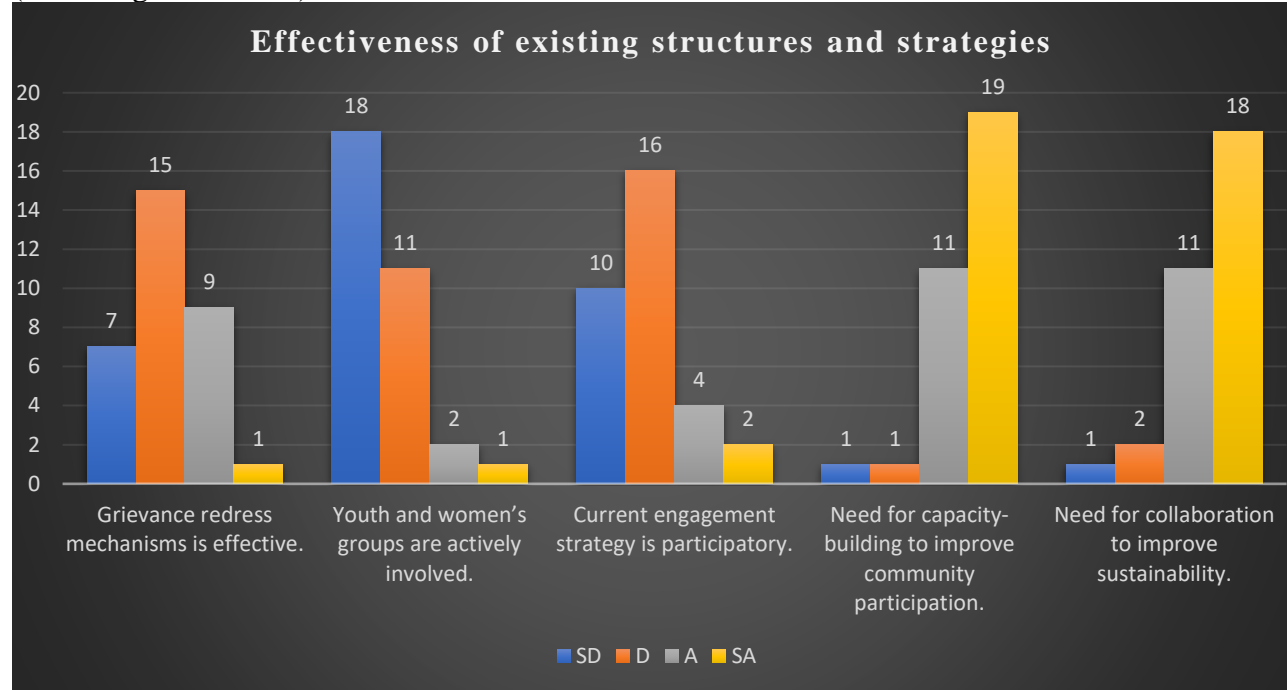
Figure 4.3: Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement Structures & Strategies. Questions 11 – 15 (excluding contractors)



Source: Field Survey, 2024

The graph shows significant gaps in stakeholder engagement in public projects in Bayelsa State. The government's framework for engaging stakeholders is perceived as weak, with 61.1% (SD = 16.7%, D = 44.4%) disagreeing that such a framework exists. Similarly, 69.4% (SD = 50%, D = 19.4%) expressed distrust in the government's ability to manage public projects sustainably. Public officials' communication with the community is also ineffective, as 63.9% (SD = 30.6%, D = 33.3%) disagreed that project updates are regularly provided. The role of traditional rulers and community heads in stakeholder engagement is questionable, with 61.1% (SD = 30.6%, D = 30.6%) disagreeing that they are adequately involved. Meanwhile, community-based organizations (CBOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) were viewed as playing a more significant role in ensuring transparency, with 66.7% (A = 38.9%, SA = 27.8%) affirming their contribution. However, grievance redress mechanisms are seen as largely ineffective, as 61.1% (SD = 19.4%, D = 41.7%) disagreed that complaints were properly addressed.

Figure 4.4: Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement Structures & Strategies. Questions 16 – 20 (excluding contractors)



Source: Field Survey, 2024

Also, very concerning is the apparent marginalisation of local youth and women's groups in project planning as shown in the graph, as 80.6% (SD = 50%, D = 30.6%) disagreed that they were actively involved. Similarly, 72.2% (SD = 27.8%, D = 44.4%) felt that current engagement strategies do not allow for meaningful participation. However, there is strong agreement (83.3%) on the need for capacity-building programs to improve participation, as well as 81.1% support for greater collaboration between the government and local communities to enhance project sustainability.

Discussion of Findings

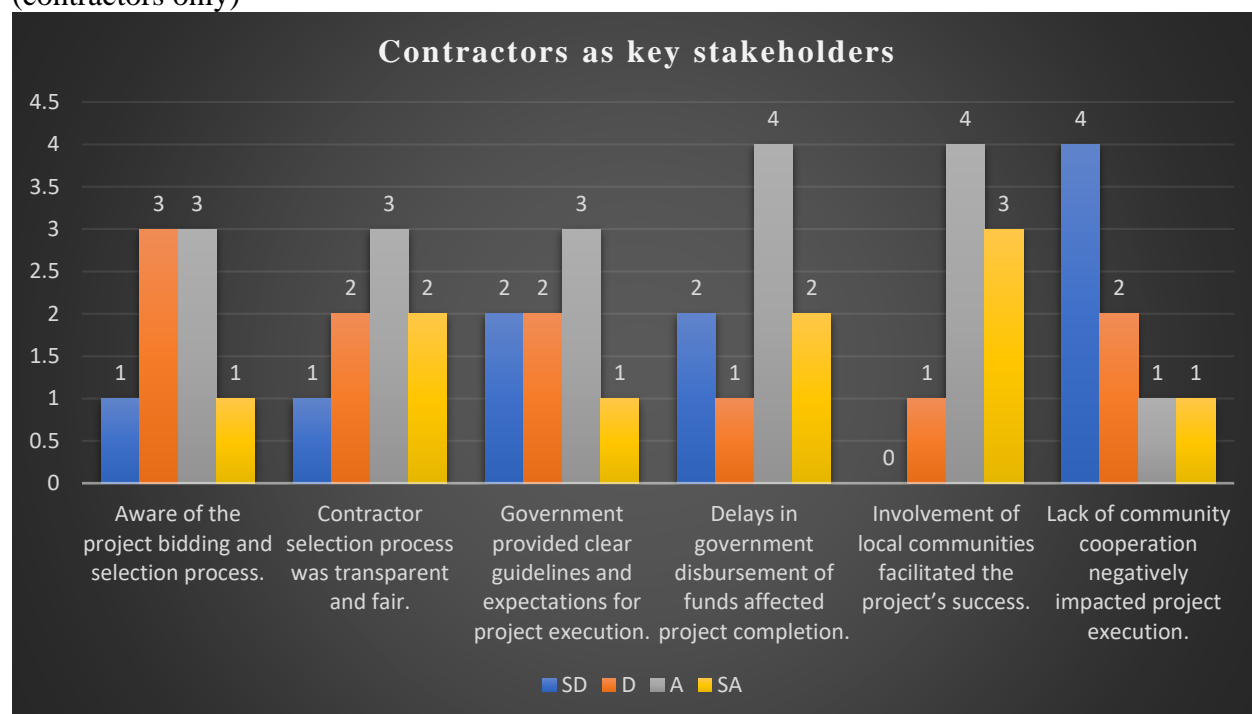
The data suggest that the lack of trust in government and weak stakeholder engagement structures contribute significantly to stakeholder unwillingness to participate in public projects. Scholars have identified trust as a critical factor in public participation, and the high level of distrust (69.4%) in the government's ability to manage projects suggests a systemic issue. Stakeholders are more likely to disengage when they perceive projects as mismanaged, corrupt, or unsustainable (Ibaba, 2007; Itu, 2024). Furthermore, the exclusion of youth and women (80.6%) from planning processes highlights the recurring issue of marginalisation in the Niger Delta and why groups often withdraw from public projects due to lack of representation. This is corroborated by perceived lack and or ineffectiveness of grievance redress mechanisms (61.1%), where participatory governance is undermined when communities lack accessible channels to voice concerns and seek redress, making it imperative to establish functional complaint mechanisms. This further discourages participation, as stakeholders are unlikely to engage if they believe their concerns will not be addressed.

However, the strong support for capacity-building (83.3%) and government-community collaboration (81.1%) indicates that stakeholders are willing to participate if proper structures are

put in place. The findings herein align with what several studies have emphasised, that community training programs increase stakeholder agency and their willingness to participate in governance at different levels (Adomokai and Sheate, 2004; Ibaba, 2007; Ewata et al., 2024; Sam and Zibima, 2024). Here, implementing training workshops can equip stakeholders with the skills necessary for active participation, reinforcing the notion that educational interventions improve long-term community engagement, participation in project development and the sustainability of community projects. This way, not only is the imperative of collaborative governance emphasised; collaboration as a mechanism for project legitimization and effectiveness is enhanced (SDN, 2023; Sam and Zibima, 2024).

On the effectiveness or otherwise of existing engagement structures and strategies, the study found that the current engagement strategies are perceived as largely ineffective, particularly in terms of government communication, grievance handling, and inclusivity. The lack of regular updates from public officials (63.9%) reflects poor transparency, a key issue noted by Adomokai and Sheate (2004), who argues that government opacity in public projects breeds mistrust and resistance. Additionally, the exclusion of traditional rulers from engagement (61.1%) is concerning, as they historically serve as intermediaries between the government and the people. The concern here has been almost unanimous that, community leaders' involvement improves participation in rural development projects, suggesting a missed opportunity in the Bayelsa context. Conversely, CBOs and CSOs are viewed as playing a stronger role in ensuring transparency (66.7%), which aligns with studies suggesting that CSOs in the Niger Delta often fill governance gaps by promoting accountability (Ibaba, 2007; Itu and Atiye, 2023). This suggests that strengthening partnerships with local organisations could improve project credibility and community participation.

Figure 4.5: Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement Structures & Strategies. Questions 21 – 26 (contractors only)



Source: Field Survey, 2024

The data highlight key issues affecting stakeholder participation in public projects, particularly regarding awareness, transparency, government engagement, financial disbursement, and community involvement. These factors significantly influence stakeholders' willingness to participate in future projects, the effectiveness of existing engagement strategies, and potential measures to enhance participation.

On awareness of the project and transparency in its determination, only 50% of respondents (A=37.5%, SA=12.5%) were aware of the project bidding and selection process, while the remaining 50% (SD=12.5%, D=37.5%) lacked awareness. This indicates a critical gap in information dissemination, potentially leading to perceptions of exclusion and bias in public projects. This is in accord with Adomokai and Sheate (2004) and Sam and Zibima (2024), who observe that a lack of stakeholder awareness often results in low participation and reduced community trust in development initiatives. Similarly, 62.5% of respondents (A=37.5%, SA=25%) agreed that the contractor selection process was transparent and fair, suggesting some level of trust in the procurement process. However, 37.5% (SD=12.5%, D=25%) disagreed, indicating that perceptions of unfairness or favouritism may still exist, suggesting that perceived corruption in contractor selection deters stakeholder engagement.

On government guidelines and financial disbursement, only half, 50% (A=37.5%, SA=12.5%) of respondents agreed that the government provided clear guidelines and expectations for project execution, while 50% (SD=25%, D=25%) felt unclear about the guidelines. This lack of clarity could lead to misunderstandings, inefficiencies, and reluctance to engage, and suggestive that well-defined policies and transparent expectations improve compliance and stakeholder commitment. Additionally, 75% of respondents (A=50%, SA=25%) agreed that delays in government disbursement of funds affected project completion, indicating that funding inconsistencies remain a major challenge, where delays lead to stalled projects, reduced stakeholder confidence, and decreased contractor interest. Conversely, on community involvement and cooperation, 87.5% of respondents (A=50%, SA=37.5%) agreed that local community involvement facilitated the project's success, highlighting the positive impact of participatory governance in reducing friction between contractors and community and thereby enhancing project sustainability.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The analysis of stakeholder engagement in public projects in Bayelsa State highlights critical gaps in awareness, participation, transparency, and project execution. Findings reveal that a significant portion of stakeholders lacks awareness of the project bidding and selection process, with only a small fraction acknowledging transparency in contract bidding and contractor selection. Furthermore, inadequate government communication, delays in fund disbursement, and weak grievance redress mechanisms contribute to stakeholder disengagement. While community involvement positively influences project success, the absence of formalized engagement frameworks and the exclusion of key groups, such as youth and women, undermine effective participation. These findings align with existing literature emphasising the need for participatory governance in public projects (Osei-Kyei and Chan, 2017; EWata et al., 2024; Sam and Zibima, 2024). Scholars have established that transparency in project planning and execution enhances trust and accountability (Itu and Atiye, 2023). Furthermore, the role of community leadership in fostering sustainable development has been widely recognised, noting that without structured stakeholder engagement, public projects risk inefficiency, lack of sustainability, and community resistance.

Thus, from the foregoing, it is noteworthy to highlight certain palpable factors as invaluable to promote public projects' efficiency and sustainability. Institutionalising stakeholder engagement frameworks, which means developing legal frameworks mandating early and continuous stakeholder involvement in public projects. This can include policy directives that outline roles, expectations, and engagement mechanisms for local communities, CSOs, and traditional leaders. Enhancing transparency and accountability to address the lack of trust in the contractor selection process, with the government establishing independent oversight bodies to monitor public procurement and project execution. Public disclosure mechanisms, such as online portals or town hall reports, should be implemented to enhance transparency. This should need to be complemented by improved communication and information dissemination system. Here, a structured communication strategy should be developed to ensure stakeholders are regularly informed about project progress, government decisions, and available grievance redress channels. Leveraging local media, digital platforms, and direct community engagement will enhance stakeholder participation. This no doubt suggests the inevitability of continuing capacity-building and inclusive participation mechanism, with targeted training programs introduced to empower marginalised groups, particularly youth and women, to take active roles in public projects. Community advisory boards should be established to institutionalize their participation in decision-making.

Additionally, the need for timely fund disbursement and effective monitoring cannot be overemphasised, since delays in government funding significantly impact project completion. Thus, there is need for a more structured financial management approach to ensure timely fund disbursement and effective resource utilisation. This will help prevent project abandonment and enhance stakeholder confidence. A corollary of this is the strengthening local leadership and collaboration. Traditional rulers and community leaders need to be integrated into formalised stakeholder engagement structures. Their role as intermediaries between the government and the people can facilitate smoother project execution and community buy-in. In the end, taken collectively, these factors can foster a culture of participatory governance, improve the effectiveness of public projects, and ensure long-term sustainability in public projects in Bayelsa State.

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