



## Very important, yet very neglected: Where do local communities stand when examining social sustainability in major construction projects?

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### ABSTRACT

Major construction projects are characterized by a heterogeneous audience of stakeholders who can create severe reputational risk to project organizations when not properly addressed. The inclusion and support that project organizations devote to local communities form a crucial part of a project's delivery and social sustainability considerations, yet this has only recently attracted attention in project studies. To address social sustainability, project managers should reinforce accountability and the inclusion of 'new voices' in the project decision-making process. Through mixed-methods research, this paper contributes to the project stakeholder engagement discourse and normative stance of stakeholder theory concerning the role of local communities and examines the ways in which inclusion can provide a response to the sustainability challenges of major projects. Findings suggest means-ends decoupling situations where current project management practices towards communities' engagement are weakly linked to their goals and induced by convergent pressures and reactive mechanisms, thus preventing an inclusive decision-making process.

### 1. Introduction

Project management literature dedicates great attention to the topic of 'sustainability' (Sabini, Muzio, & Alderman, 2019; Silvius, 2017), and over time has slowly shifted from focusing predominantly on environmental impacts (Fernández-Sánchez & Rodríguez-López, 2010), sustainable procurement (Zuo & Potangaroa, 2009) and sustainable control practices (Kivilä, Martinsuo, & Vuorinen, 2017) toward a greater attention to projects' contributions to social sustainability (Shen, Tam, Tam, & Ji, 2010). Indeed, according to Wang, Zhang, and Lu (2018), although the importance of the social sustainability dimension has been recognized in recent decades along with the developmental momentum of corporate social responsibility, no consensus has yet been reached (Vallance et al., 2011). The vast literature on the subject of social sustainability criteria is a taxonomy that includes social capital, social infrastructure, social justice and equity, and engaged governance (Agarchand & Laishram, 2017; Cuthill, 2010; Dempsey, Bramley, Power, & Brown, 2011), in which the latest focuses on the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders in the decision-making process (Dawkins, 2015; Derakhshan, Turner, & Mancini, 2019b; Xie et al., 2017). However, for the purpose of this study, we align with the UN Global Compact

social sustainability definition which is about identifying and managing business impact on people, both positive and negative, and where the quality of a company's relationships and engagement with its stakeholders is critical (UN Global Compact, 2021). Therefore, from a social sustainability perspective, we concentrate on the inclusion (or rather the exclusion) of external stakeholders, such as local communities, in the decision-making process of major construction projects (MCPs).

Through a normative commitment to accountability and 'democratization' of governance, managers should achieve organizational purpose and goals by fostering proactive engagement and harmonizing the interests of all stakeholders (Business Roundtable, 2019; Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & De Colle, 2010). However, due to scale of ambition, complexity, social and organization relations, temporality, and significant social impacts (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2014), MCPs are particularly susceptible to risks of poor project delivery or inadequate stakeholder engagement (Denicol, Davies, & Krystallis, 2020; Eskerod, Huemann, & Savage, 2015). Therefore, such projects are notoriously difficult to manage compared to regular-sized programs and are cluttered by traditional norms ruling the project management profession, crafted to avoid outside disruption to pre-determined targets and return on investment (Cicmil, Williams, Thomas, & Hodgson, 2006;

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Svejvig & Andersen, 2015).

Against this background, Gil and Fu (2021) reinforce the need for MCPs to widen their boundaries of responsibility in which scope needs to be increasingly negotiated with society. Nonetheless, governments and project promoters have been called to nurture constructive, mutually beneficial relationships with communities (e.g., Global Infrastructure Hub, 2021; UN Global Compact, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2020). Yet there is still a lack of agreement in theory and practice over the ways in which the ‘often-disregarded’ stakeholders (e.g., local communities) have been treated and prioritized in MCPs (Cuganesan & Floris, 2020; Derakhshan, Mancini, & Turner, 2019a; Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019).

Despite the general idea that ‘inclusion is a good thing’, little focus has been given to investigate the growing importance of communities in theory and the reasons behind their marginal inclusion in projects. On one hand, in line with business and management research, the lack of broad inclusion of stakeholders in project decision-making has been attributed, at least in part, to managers focusing on the attribute of ‘power’ in the network of stakeholders and aiming at prioritizing shareholder wealth maximization as the single-valued objective of the corporation (e.g., Jones & Felps, 2013a, 2013b). On the other hand, project managers’ over-reliance on the resource-based view, in which stakeholders are seen as resource providers for the organization and not *vice-versa*, especially when these stakeholders tend to be outside project contracts and rules and regulations (and cannot be approached with these instruments) (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2015). This underscores that, despite the growing body of knowledge pertaining to moral and ethical obligations towards communities and project social sustainability, more empirical studies are needed to examine the importance of including local communities for the implementation of sustainable practices (Baba, Mohammad, & Young, 2021; Di Maddaloni & Derakhshan, 2019; Eskerod & Huemann, 2013). Therefore, in response to the growing consideration of local communities’ stakeholders in practice (e.g., Business Roundtable, 2019; NETLIPSE, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2020), and the apparent theoretical gap in prioritizing them as stakeholders (e.g., Derakhshan, 2020; Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; Dunham, Freeman, & Liedtka, 2006;), this explorative study investigates the inclusion of local communities in the decision-making process of MCPs, by posing the following research questions: (1) *What priority do construction project managers place upon local communities’ inclusion in implementing social sustainable actions?* And (2) *How do project managers consider local communities in the decision-making of social sustainable MCPs?*

In answering these research questions, the paper explores the current status and barriers to external stakeholder inclusion in MCPs and thus to the effective implementation of sustainable social practices. We argue that the problem of broad stakeholder inclusion in organization decision-making also arises because of the existence of divergent external and internal project pressures leading to decoupling between what project managers believe to be moral – including all stakeholders, and what they actually do – focusing on economic value. Nonetheless, we contribute to the literature on project stakeholder inclusion and project sustainability by unveiling how fast-moving regulations and limited time and resources availability for external stakeholder engagement, drive *means-ends decoupling* situations (Bromley & Power, 2012) leading to the implementation of real actions of a symbolic rather than a substantive nature. Our contention is that decoupling between managers’ beliefs and actions drives stakeholder instrumental prioritization and hinders any MCPs sustainable social practices.

The paper is organized as follow, first we review the literature of project social sustainability, stakeholder theory, and local communities in MCPs. Second, we present a mixed-methods approach focusing on the project managers inclusive decision-making perspective and practices. Finally, based on both the results of the quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews, we discuss the study’s findings and the means-ends decoupling concept by illustrating our contributions to theory and practice.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Social sustainability in projects

Sustainable development and sustainability-related topics have become an established field of study both in general management (Schaltegger, Hörisch, & Freeman, 2019) and in project management (Huemann & Silvius, 2017; Sabini et al., 2019). Sustainable project management is considered one of the ten schools of thought within project management (Bredillet, Turner, & Anbari, 2007a; Silvius, 2017) and is defined as “the planning, monitoring and controlling of project delivery and support processes, with consideration of the environmental, economic and social aspects of the life-cycle of the project’s resources, processes, deliverables and effects, aimed at realizing benefits for stakeholders, and performed in a transparent, fair and ethical way that includes proactive stakeholder participation” (Silvius & Schipper, 2014, p.79). A number of research studies have been conducted to identify the interconnections between project management and sustainable development, and the fast-growing momentum of sustainability challenges in practical terms has seen literature fast exploring all aspects of Elkington (1997) triple bottom line concept: environmental, social and economic.

The first of the UN Global Compact’s principles focuses on the social dimension of corporate sustainability, of which human rights is the cornerstone. Directly or indirectly, companies affect what happens to employees, workers in the value chain, customers and local communities, and it is important to manage this impact proactively. While it is the primary duty of governments to protect, respect, fulfil and progressively realize human rights, businesses can, and should, do their part (UN Global Compact, 2021). By embracing ethical and sustainable courses of action, organizations should contribute in other ways to improve the lives of the people they affect, such as by creating decent jobs, goods and services that help meet basic needs, and more inclusive value chains and decision-making processes (Business Roundtable, 2019). They should make strategic social investments and promote public policies that support social sustainability, partner with other businesses, and pool strengths to make a greater positive impact (UN Global Compact, 2021). These sustainable social practices are also closely aligned with The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (2020), and focus on promoting sustainable economic growth and infrastructure, reducing urban inequalities, and creating wide-ranging partnerships in society. Social aspects include “equity, human rights, labour rights, practices and decent working conditions, social responsibility and justice, community development and well-being, product responsibility, community resilience, and cultural competence” (Balaman, 2019, p.86), all values that are very difficult to measure.

Wang et al. (2018) argue that the vast literature on social sustainability includes dimensions of social capital, social infrastructure, social justice and equity, and engaged governance (Agarchand & Laishram, 2017; Cuthill, 2010; Dempsey et al., 2011; Dillard, Dujon, & King, 2009). Social capital and social infrastructure are regarded as two preparatory aspects for achieving social sustainability through the provision of a variety of resources and corresponding facilities and institutions. Social justice and equity relate to the accessibility of resources and opportunities such as education, decent housing, green space and recreational facilities, and the protection of the rights and liberties of individuals or groups in the social context. Engaged and inclusive governance focuses on the inclusion of stakeholders in decision-making, providing the opportunity for a broader range of stakeholders to be heard and be considered by the focal organization (Dawkins, 2015; Derakhshan et al., 2019b; Xie et al., 2017). Together these constitute a comprehensive system for empirical testing and from which social sustainability indicators can be derived (Cuthill, 2010).

Therefore, in examining the social aspects of sustainability, project scholars consider issues connected with stakeholder engagement as a vital driver of overall sustainability considerations (e.g., Baba et al.,

2021; Eskerod & Huemann, 2013; Keeyes & Huemann, 2017; Yuan, 2017). For example, Silvius (2017) notes that “having a management for stakeholders’ approach and applying triple bottom line criteria for business case” (p.1484) secures improved project performance. When considering stakeholders, it is instinctive to expect their inclusion in project decision-making processes to be a component part of social sustainability. Yet, it is this ‘social aspect of sustainability’ that is often neglected (Rego, Cunha, & Polónia, 2017), deserving more attention in project studies (Aaltonen, Derakhshan, Di Maddaloni, & Turner, 2021).

Through the years, academics and policymakers alike have been encouraged to expand the traditional focus on project benefits to include a wider audience of stakeholders as a business’s social license to operate depends greatly on their social sustainability efforts. In this sense, ‘sustainable project management’ and ‘stakeholder inclusion’ very often overlap regarding the social aspects of sustainability. This study differentiates between involvement (doing *to*), such as consultation, and engagement (doing *with*), leading to stakeholder participation and inclusiveness. On one hand, involvement should be seen based on the degree to which stakeholders will influence the final outcome and, although these preferences might be incorporated into a decision, these are rarely accepted without some form of modification or compromise (e.g., Hampton, 2009). On the other hand, engagement “refers to the aims, activities, and impacts of stakeholder relations in a moral, strategic, and/or pragmatic manner” (Kujala, Sachs, Leinonen, Heikkinen, & Laude, 2022, p.4). Here, from a moral and pragmatic perspective, we see engagement as an ongoing process in which various stakeholders (e.g., local communities) are brought together around the project and included in its operations or decision-making processes (e.g., Bandé, Ika, & Winch, 2021; Cundy et al., 2013; Lehtinen and Aaltonen, 2020). Based on the above discussion, this paper connects with the idea of social sustainability as a set of ethical practices, i.e., long-term strategies and societal wider inclusion in decision-making (Dawkins, 2015; Meadowcroft, 2013; Rickards, Ison, & Funfgeld, 2014; Zeemering, 2018). Under the umbrella of ‘project social sustainability’, our work reconciles the concept of ‘stakeholder inclusion’ and ‘social sustainability practices’ as the broader engagement of the often-disregarded external stakeholders (i.e., local communities) in the project decision-making process.

## 2.2. Two contrasting stakeholder theoretical approaches

Stakeholder literature is conceptualized by two main and contrasting approaches: management-of-stakeholders and management-for-and-with-stakeholders (Freeman, Harrison, & Wicks, 2007; 2010). The first aligns with the instrumental formulation of stakeholder theory, which sees stakeholders as resource providers for the organization, and categorizes them based on their potential ability to help or harm the organization (Eskerod & Huemann, 2013). This approach sees stakeholders as resource providers to the organization, based on their interests (Clarke, 2004; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). When there is a conflict of interest, trade-offs must be made, and whenever there is the need for a trade-off, prioritization is inevitable. This links back to the three stakeholder relationship attributes introduced by Mitchell, Agle, and Wood (1997) – power, legitimacy, and urgency – known as the stakeholders’ salience framework, which has been extensively used in stakeholder management practices.

In organizations constrained by limited resources, stakeholders are instrumentally managed to comply with the organization’s needs (with manipulation and anticipation) (e.g., Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014). The main focus of engagement naturally falls on internal stakeholders, such as owners, suppliers, employees and customers, who have a formal, contractual relationship with, or direct legal authority over, the organization (Eesley & Lenox, 2006). As Phillips, Freeman, and Wicks (2003) assert, this neo-classical view of the firm leads to maximizing shareholder wealth or value, rather than optimizing collective value, since they are the main priority of the focal organization. This organization-centric approach can result in an “unbalanced perspective

in which the stakeholder voice of some stakeholders is under-represented and remains a limitation of stakeholder theory” (Miles, 2017, p.448).

Normative scholars (e.g., Derry, 2012; Jones & Wicks, 1999) have criticized this view by acknowledging business as ‘moral in nature’, with the need to consider inputs from all affected parties (Freeman, 1994; Jensen & Sandström, 2013). These principles, according to Bowie (1998), “seem especially important for a theory that builds its theory of respect on human autonomy” (p.47). This theoretical stance, therefore, perceives the organization as a connected set of relationships between stakeholders that is not built on principles of competition, but on cooperation and caring.

In this regard, management-for-and-with-stakeholders (Freeman et al., 2007; 2010) links back to the normative formulation of stakeholder theory also claimed in project studies (e.g., Eskerod et al., 2015; Huemann, Eskerod, & Ringhofer, 2016), which considers stakeholders as legitimate groups whose interests are respected and worthy of consideration in their own right. Regardless of their ability to help or harm the organization, and regardless of their level of power in the network of stakeholders, this holistic approach considers the often ‘disregarded’ external stakeholders, such as community groups, unions, consumer advocates, special interest groups, the media, and non-governmental organizations (Aaltonen, Kujala, & Oijala, 2008).

Another view is that stakeholders are identified according to their interest in the focal organization. The aim of the project organization focuses on meeting and exceeding stakeholders’ needs and expectations by adopting the concepts of ‘sustainable project management’, which aim to deliver benefits to a broad range of stakeholders (Baba et al., 2021; Keeyes & Huemann, 2017). Therefore, the normative formulation of stakeholder theory provides the springboard for our debate. In line with Eskerod and Huemann (2013), the perspective of this study reinforces that social sustainability is a normative concept whereby project managers need to contribute to sustainability objectives and act in the best interest of all stakeholders. We claim that, in order to foster sustainable processes and social outcomes within projects, project managers need to take the required steps to adopt a more inclusive decision-making approach towards their external stakeholders (such as local communities).

## 2.3. Major projects and stakeholders: the case of local communities

Large scale projects can be important tools for fostering modernization and enhancing economic and social development (Altshuler & Luberoff, 2003; Kara, Tas, & Ada, 2016). They are also important for their levels of aspiration, lead times, complexity and divergent stakeholder interests. Despite these complexities, construction projects are increasing in number and dimension, a trend that progressively impacts people, budgets and urban spaces (Xue, Zhang, Zhang, Yang, & Li, 2015), and one that has been further increased in an attempt to boost post-pandemic recovery (The Economist, 2021). However, the documented performance of these projects has led to a negative focus in the academic literature on major construction developments that are too often unable to meet their basic targets of budget, time and expected benefits to stakeholders (e.g., Denicol et al., 2020; Flyvbjerg, 2014).

Controversies around the construction industry are often connected with stakeholders and their management. Indeed, the focus on MCP benefits has mainly been from the perspective of national governments or large public or private organizations (Mok, Shen, & Yang, 2015), where local stakeholders have often been overlooked and therefore warrant investigation (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017). It is argued that local communities continue to face significant adverse consequences, and that their inclusion in decision-making processes is still limited. Notwithstanding, it is not the intended contribution of this study to identify and assess the different groups of local stakeholders in MCPs (see Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018), but rather this work builds on the foundation by which (in principle) all stakeholders are considered by the

focal organization.

It is acknowledged in the literature that local community cannot be treated as a single, homogeneous, easily identifiable group since they possess their own perceptions and visions (Skerratt & Steiner, 2013; Teo & Loosemore, 2011). Therefore, this study conceives the local community as “members of a local population which express a shared sense of identity while engaging in the common concerns of life” (Theodori, 2005, pp.662-663), and emphasizes the traditional view based on geography, or place-based communities, which is centered on the physical proximity of members to project developments (Dunham et al., 2006). This also represents the most common conceptualization of what is meant by ‘community’ by project managers in the construction industry (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018; Teo & Loosemore, 2011).

On another level, MCPs are considered to be drivers of change and very often connected with the transition to a more sustainable economy (Malekpour, Brown, & de Haan, 2017), a trend which has been amplified in the post-pandemic recovery (Barbier, 2020). The management of MCPs therefore needs to align with the principles of transparency, fairness and inclusion, which are at the core of the sustainability agenda. Indeed, the impact of well-organized components of local communities on project outcomes is widely evidenced in the literature (e.g., Olander & Landin, 2008; Teo & Loosemore, 2014; van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019). The North-South Metro Line in Amsterdam, the World Cup in Brazil, the HS2 in England, the Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), and the Turin-Lyon High-Speed Rail are just a few examples of projects shaken by the fierce resistance of local communities.

It is also important to highlight that major steps have been made in recent years by governments’ project promoters across the world towards a more stakeholder-inclusive approach (e.g., Business Roundtable, 2019; NETLIPSE, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2020). Even though local communities are recognized as being risk-bearers and can suffer as a direct result of their proximity to construction projects (Olander, 2007), the attention given to local communities remains marginal and their inclusion in project decision-making is still not sufficiently captured in either theory or practice (Derakhshan, 2020; Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017).

The reviewed literature suggests that while it is clear that calls for greater stakeholder engagement are on the rise in the social sustainable domain, both understanding for the inclusion of external stakeholders and its mechanisms are lacking (particularly for local communities). Although stakeholder theory recognizes the growing importance of communities, few studies unpacked questions on how, and to what ends, the inclusion of such stakeholders matters to social sustainable construction projects. Several contradictions exist in the ways in which local communities are treated and prioritized in complex social systems such as MCPs, with project managers struggling to respond to the call for better social sustainability through effective actions. Fast-moving institutional laws and regulations are progressively requiring organizations to better include local needs in their proposed plans; however, project managers seem ill-equipped in including legitimate community voices into the decision-making processes affecting their lives. In this context, the normative stance of stakeholder theory provides the glue for investigating the social sustainable (ethical) actions that project managers devote to their external stakeholders, and inductively exploring their (moral) beliefs in considering local communities in the project decision-making. However, it seems that a deeper understanding is needed to capture the challenges preventing the moral aspiration of the normative stakeholder theory to flourish in practice in MCPs.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Research approach

According to Cameron, Sankaran, and Scales (2015), more mixed methods studies are required in the field of project management. In line with Tashakkori and Teddlie (2010), this study stresses the importance

and predominance of the research question over the paradigm, and therefore the research’s epistemological position towards pragmatism should not be considered a limitation for integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods when necessary. Pragmatism is premised on the idea that “research can steer clear of metaphysical debates about the nature of truth and reality and focus instead on ‘practical understandings’ of concrete, real-world issues” (Patton, 2005, p.153). The emphasis is on interrogating the value and meaning of research data through examination of its practical consequences and exploring and understanding the connections between knowledge and action in context (Morgan, 2014b). In order to ensure a systematic and rigorous research process, the method employed in this study is the sequential QUAN→QUAL mixed methods, consisting of two sequential strands: a quantitative survey strand followed by a qualitative semi-structured interview strand, as suggested by Ivankova (2014).

Drawing on our conceptual development, the goal was to design an investigation both quantitatively and qualitatively in order to gain a deeper insight into project management social sustainability practices devoted to local community stakeholder inclusiveness in the construction industry and MCPs’ decision-making, while ensuring that any meta-inferences made were valid and justified. ‘Meta-inference’ is identified as “a conclusion generated through an integration of the inferences that have been obtained from the results of the QUAN and QUAL strands of the mixed methods” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009, p.152). The data collected in the first, quantitative strand provided: a) a general picture of the integration level of sustainability practices across different industries regarding the stakeholder engagement process of the project, and b) the benefits and barriers to sustainable practices that project managers perceived as being important. The qualitative follow-up interviews sought an explanation of the quantitative trends within a specific industry (i.e., MCPs) and helped elaborate on the somewhat unexpected statistical results. In line with Ivankova (2014), in the final stage of the study the quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated to create meta-inferences, with the purpose of providing more complete and insightful answers to the research questions. The conceptual representation of the research method is represented in Fig. 1.

#### 3.2. Strand I: quantitative data collection and analysis

The goal of the first quantitative study strand was to identify management consideration towards local communities when implementing sustainable practices across different industries, and to compare this with that of the construction industry (i.e., MCPs). A questionnaire was devised and sent to practitioners who were directly involved in the management of projects. The questionnaire, distributed worldwide, covered different industries such as aviation, consultancy, construction and IT. The questionnaire was built from previous research (Martens & Carvalho, 2017; Raderbauer, 2011) which examined sustainable business practices. The participant sample was selected from project management LinkedIn groups and professional networks. The type of contact with the participants was on a one-to-one basis. With 369 valid responses, the sample was deemed to be representative across different industries (see Fig. 2). Communications were sent in the period December 2016 to July 2017, with a gentle reminder after one month from initial contact.

Respondents were invited to think about their last completed project and to answer the fifteen-minute questionnaire. Three-quarters of the projects in the sample were developed in Europe (Fig. 3) and the sample (dominated by males 75%) included participants from all age ranges (27% aged 25-34; 28% aged 35-44; 31% aged 45-54; and 12% aged 55 and over) and with different levels of experience (8% one year or less in PM; 25% between 2 to 5 years; 22% between 6 to 10 years; 44% more than 10 years). Half of the projects considered by the sample included between 1 and 5 participants (51%), and a consistent number of projects considered had between 6 and 15 participants (26%). Although the survey captured a holistic picture of social sustainable actions across



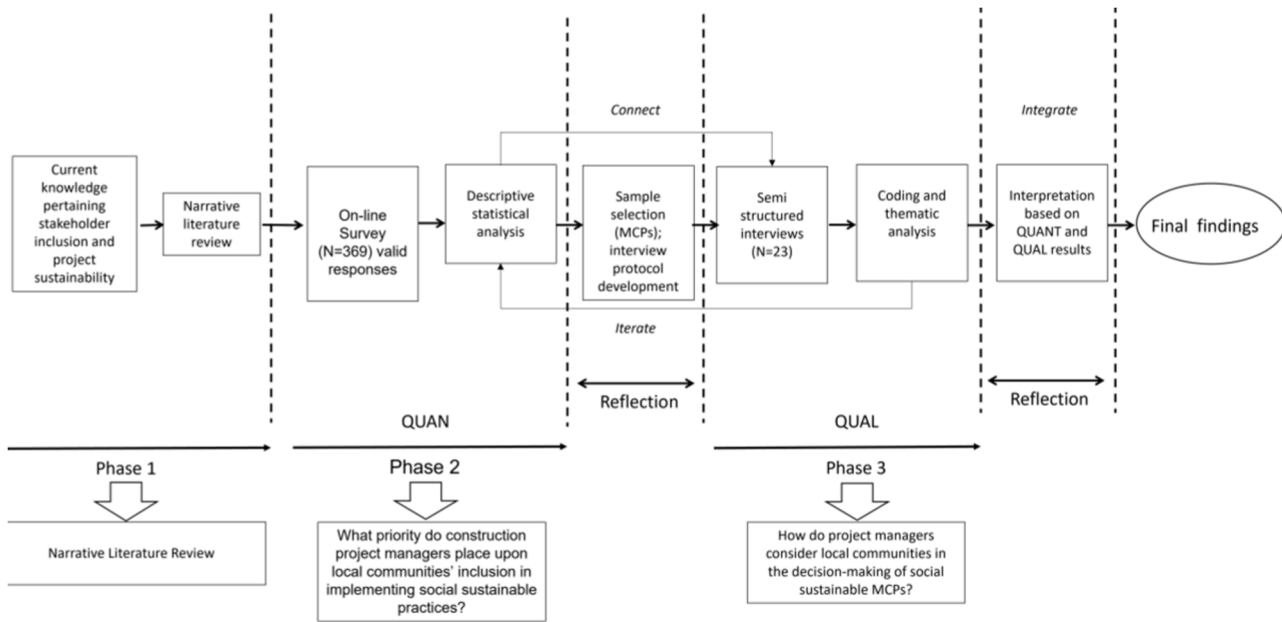


Fig. 1. Conceptual representation of the research method, adapted from Ivankova (2014).

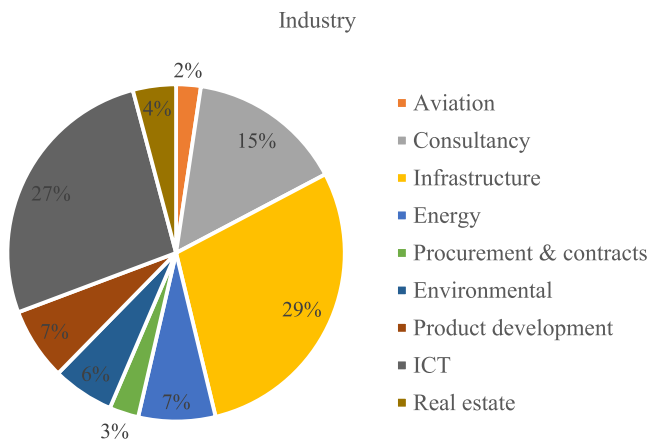


Fig. 2. Industries from the sample.

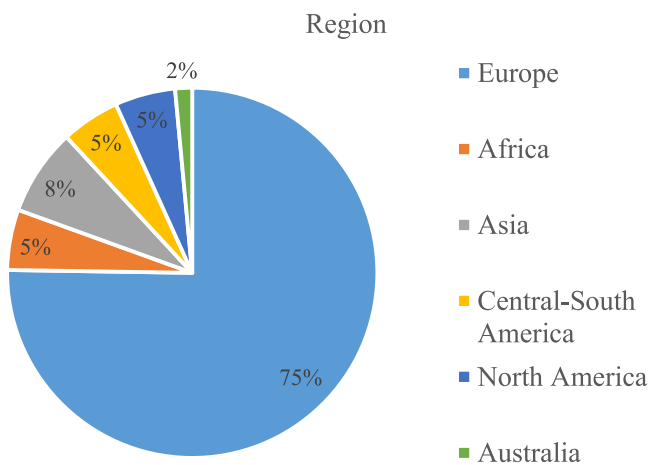


Fig. 3. Regions affected by the project.

different industries, this study focuses on the construction industry (29%, n.107) in which project budgets were found to be quite heterogeneous, ranging from \$10,000 to \$2.5 billion. However, we have selected only projects with budget over \$5 million (n.57) with the sample’s mean of \$202 million (Fig. 4) to ensure better homogeneity of the data and consistent empirical analysis.

3.3. Strand II: qualitative data collection and analysis

The goal of the follow-up, qualitative study strand was to elaborate on the survey’s quantitative results and to gain a more detailed understanding of how project managers include local communities in their management of sustainable MCPs. Building on the survey results that investigated the construction industry, the qualitative strand of the research specifically focused on MCPs due to their notorious impact on people and places, and their relevance to the sustainability discourse.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 key people in the construction industry that best enabled the authors to answer their research questions and to reach theoretical saturation. The purposive sampling (non-random sampling) included senior managers in strategic planning, project managers and communication managers who also agreed to take part in the subsequent qualitative study. All interviewees had a senior managerial role (20+ years of experience), were currently involved, or had been involved, in construction projects, and either directly managed stakeholders or ensured that there was a stakeholder management strategy in place from the project initiation phase. They therefore possessed the required skills and knowledge to best answer the research questions.

Both the purposive sample and the interview protocol were based on the results and content of the survey items and consisted of questions that sought further understanding of the role of local community stakeholders in the sustainability actions adopted by project organizations. Through the lens of the normative stance of stakeholder theory (management-for-and-with-stakeholders), the interview questions were designed to understand the moral and ethical obligations that project managers perceive apply to local communities in practice. The aim was to extend current knowledge towards the benefits and challenges of including external stakeholders (i.e., local communities) in the decision-making processes of MCPs. The initial questions therefore were designed to outline the population profile (e.g., managerial experience, role,

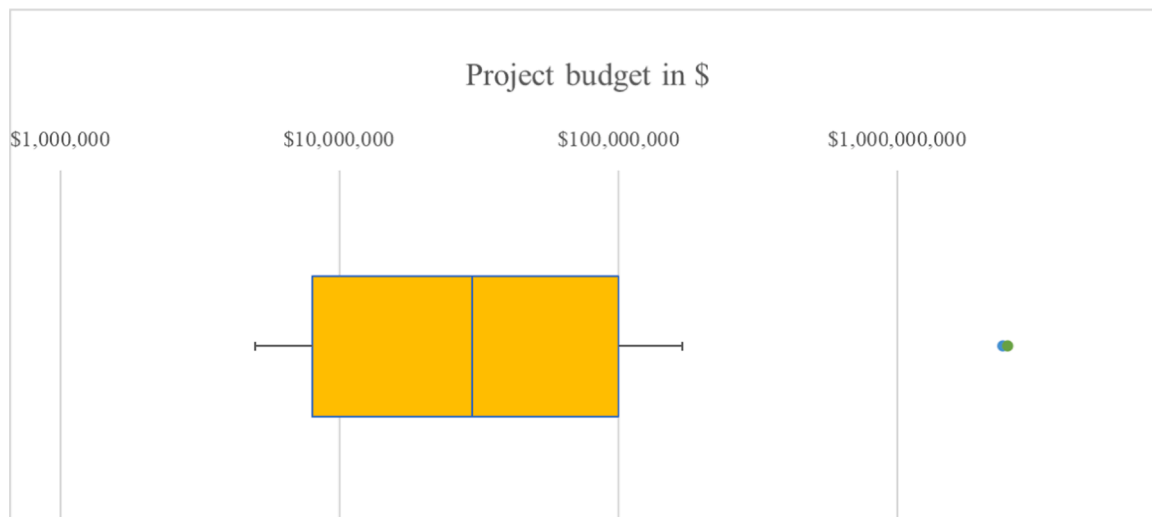


Fig. 4. Construction project budgets (min \$5M, mean \$202M, max \$2.5bn).

responsibilities) and gather contextual information about the MCPs (e. g., aims and objectives, budget, time, scope, performance). Later questions covered the following key themes: 1. Social sustainable practices and stakeholders’ prioritization (how and why); 2. Understanding the local community stakeholder (identification, categorization, needs, expectations, attitude); 3. Impact of MCPs on local communities (organization sustainable strategies, project management sustainable practices, positive impact, negative impact); 4. Stakeholder management practices at the local community level (engagement effort, reasons, benefits and barriers); 5. Local community input in the decision-making process (reasons, priorities, benefits and barriers). Appendix 5 presents the Interview Guide.

The purposive sample of the study is presented in Table 1.

Interviews were held face-to-face, online or over the telephone, and concluded in February 2017. The 23 interviews took between 20 and 115 minutes and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All the interview transcripts were imported into a qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo 11) and inductively coded.

The interview data were inductively analyzed by one of the authors following the six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2012), which include: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing potential themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The themes from the interviews were then matched to both the relevant literature and the quantitative strand results for comparison, contrast, and similarity (Bazeley & Richards, 2000). Secondary data such as external reports, newspapers and materials from the interviewees enhanced the contextual information of the discussed projects (e.g., flyers, internal reports, websites and other documentary accounts), and were used to integrate and triangulate interview responses providing additional insights on stakeholder management/engagement practices over time. The use of secondary data helped to increase the trustworthiness of the study.

#### 4. Results and findings

##### 4.1. Quantitative strand I results

The survey aimed to answer the following question: *What priority do construction project managers place upon local communities’ inclusion in implementing social sustainable actions?* The results showed that project managers tend to involve external stakeholders (e.g., local communities) when creating reports on project sustainability performance (Fig. 5). Unsurprisingly, MCPs tend to demonstrate a higher consideration of

Table 1  
Purposive sample of the study.

Index	ID	Interviewees	Years of experience in managerial position	Infrastructure project
1	CM4	Communication Manager	20+ years	A14
2	CM11	Communication Manager	20+ years	A14
3	CM1	Communication Manager	20+ years	Crossrail
4	CM8	Communication Manager	20+ years	Hinkley Nuclear Connection
5	CM7	Communication Manager	20+ years	Lower Thames Crossing
6	CM9	Communication Manager	20+ years	Lower Thames Crossing
7	CM14	Communication Manager	20+ years	Bank Station Capacity Upgrade
8	CM6	Communication Manager	20+ years	HS2
9	CM17	Communication Manager	20+ years	Stonehenge A303 Project
10	PM19	Project Manager	20+ years	DLR Capacity Upgrading
11	PM3	Project Manager	20+ years	Magnox Swarf Storage Silos
12	PM10	Project Manager	20+ years	Astute Nuclear Submarine
13	PM15	Project Manager	20+ years	Southwark Regeneration Programme
14	PM13	Project Manager	20+ years	Bank Station Capacity Upgrade
15	PM20	Project Manager	15+ years	Breen Tunneling Project
16	PM21	Project Manager	15+ years	Oslo International Airport
17	PM22	Project Manager	20+ years	Padua Tramway
18	SM12	Project Manager	20+ years	Thames Tideway
19	SM5	Senior Manager	20+ years	London Olympics
20	SM16	Senior Manager	20+ years	Hamworthy Regeneration Programme
21	SM2	Senior Manager	20+ years	London Olympics
22	SM18	Senior Manager	20+ years	Montgomeryshire Wind Farm
23	SM23	Senior Manager	20+ years	Rome Metro Line C

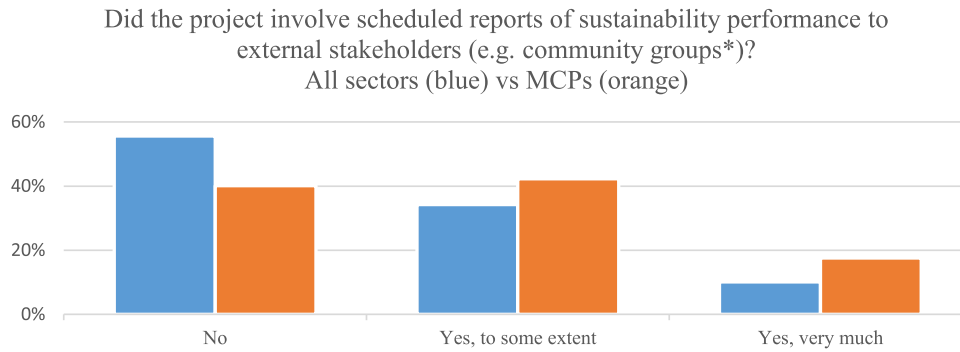


Fig. 5. Scheduled reports of sustainability performance to external stakeholders.

external stakeholders than other industries, due to the unavoidable physical impact that these projects place on their surrounding environments. However, it should be noted that the percentage of project managers who do not involve external stakeholders is still about 40% (Fig. 5).

A different look at internal and external stakeholders involved in the integration of sustainable objectives and consideration in projects shows how little attention is given to local communities (Fig. 6). Specifically, considering medium and high levels of local community engagement, only half of project managers consider these stakeholders, while 32% have low or no engagement at all, and 20% consider them not relevant to the project. Given the heterogeneity of industries, it is possible to explain this 20% since several sectors (e.g., consultancy or IT) do not normally involve local communities in their projects.

A more significant consideration, by looking at local community engagement in construction and infrastructure projects, reveals that 19% of our sample judge these local communities as not relevant, and 23% have low or no engagement at all (with 58% of the sample having medium and high engagement). In the context of MCPs, these data are particularly interesting, as the engagement of local communities is deemed to be important in achieving high levels of project performance (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017).

MCPs are, by their nature, characterised by the hefty impact of their construction sites, and so the consideration of local communities is considered a standard issue. It was therefore quite an unexpected finding that one-fifth of these projects consider the local community not relevant and that almost one-quarter is explicitly not engaging with this stakeholder (Fig. 7).

Another element that emerged from the survey relates to the sustainable business practices adopted in the project processes. To examine the inclusion of local communities in MCPs, the authors asked to what extent particular sustainable business practices had been adopted during the project. To ensure consistency of results, and to assess the overall performances of the MCPs, the answers were compared with those from

projects in other industries, as shown in Table 2.

The results in Table 2 highlight that for some measures, MCPs perform better than other types of projects of comparable size.

The study’s findings show that MCPs tend to (a) take into account the financial benefits originating from environmental and social good practices, (b) support ethical behaviour (fair trade, competition and anti-crime policies, codes of conduct, etc.), and (c) avoid negative impacts on local communities, more than other types of projects. They also tend to (a) report project (progress) reflecting indicators of environmental and/or social sustainability, (b) offer local stakeholder access to project information, and (c) sponsor and/or support at least one community action or group, less than other types of projects.

Given the business practices adopted in the project processes, the study went on to investigate what constituted an inhibitor or a catalyst for the adoption of those practices (Table 3).

For MCPs, sustainable business practices tend to be more easily adopted if they (a) are recommended by other project partners and/or stakeholders, (b) reduce negative impacts on social, cultural and ecological environment, and (c) improve the relationship with the local community. In contrast, they tend to be less likely adopted if there is (a) lack of support and information from other stakeholders in the project, and (b) limited public awareness of the need for sustainability.

This initial analysis served the purpose of discovering the degree to which local communities were integrated in project management social sustainability practices comparing MCPs vs non- MCPs. The findings from the second strand of research focus on the ‘how’ question, regarding the way in which project managers include local communities in their management of social sustainable infrastructure and construction projects, and specifically how the engagement of local communities is embraced by project organizations to achieve sustainable development in MCPs.

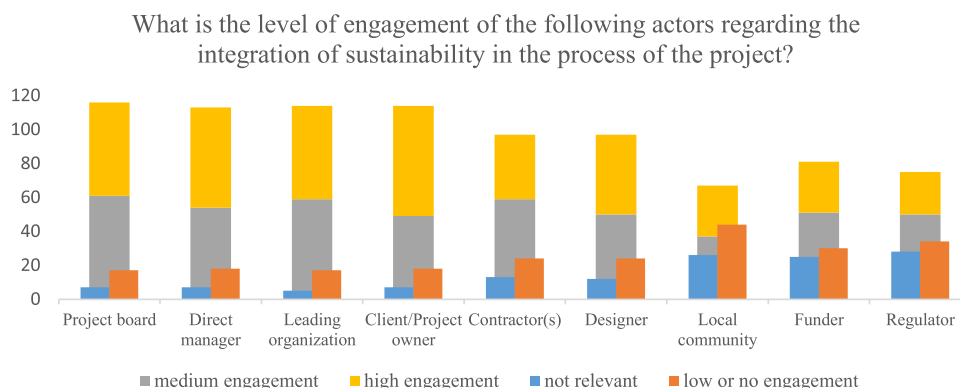


Fig. 6. Level of actors' engagement in the achievement of sustainable objectives in the project (any industry).

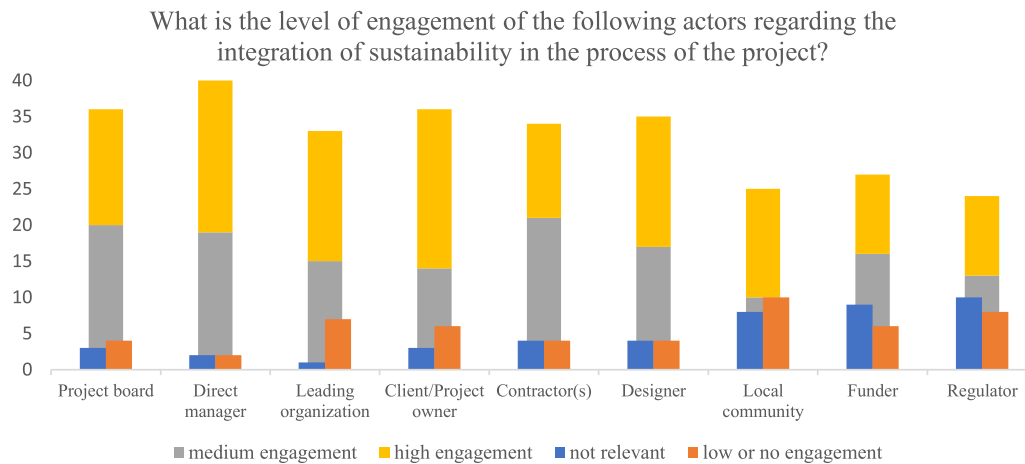


Fig. 7. Level of actors' engagement in the achievement of sustainable project objectives (MCPs).

Table 2

Sustainable business practices in project processes.

To what extent did you use the following measures in your last concluded project?	MCPs	Non-MCPs
Reported project (progress) reflecting indicators of environmental and/or social sustainability	3.40	3.22
Took into account the financial benefits originating from environmental and social good practices	3.64	3.35
Offered local stakeholder access to project information	4.00	4.03
Supported ethical behaviour (fair trade, competition and anti-crime policies, codes of conduct, etc.)	4.92	4.16
Sponsored and/or supported at least one community action or group	3.53	3.36
Avoided negative impacts on local communities	4.80	4.93

\*The number in the table show the average (1 – not relevant to 7 –extremely relevant) for respondents for each question.

Table 3

Inhibitors and catalysts for the adoption of practices.

Benefits to sustainable business practices – In my project, sustainable business practices were most likely to be implemented because they...	MCPs	Non-MCPs
Were recommended from other project partners and/or stakeholders	3.98	3.47
Reduced negative impacts on social, cultural and ecological environment	4.50	4.27
Improved the relationship with the local community	4.25	4.23
Barriers to sustainable business practices – In your project, how relevant were the following barriers to the implementation of sustainable business practices?		
Lack of support and information from other stakeholders in the project	4.00	4.29
Limited public awareness with regard to the need for sustainability	4.07	4.14

\*The number in the table is the average (1– not relevant to 7 – extremely relevant) for respondents for each question.

#### 4.2. Qualitative Strand II findings

The thematic analysis of the 23 interviews produced over 900 initial codes. Given that the main objective of the coding process was to capture both diversity and similarities within the data, the thematic analysis process focused on comparison, contrast, and similarity against patterns in the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This systematic approach returned three themes and nine sub-themes, which allowed the authors to build on the quantitative results strand and answer their research question, namely: *How do project managers consider local communities in*

#### the decision-making of social sustainable MCPs?

When analyzing the interviews, it was found that participants' feelings, perceptions and understanding of the topic resulted in three sets of themes that captured the most important elements of the data: (1) Sustaining the (un)sustainable – organizational efforts towards construction impact; (2) Building trust through engagement – sustaining local community resilience; and (3) Important, but not enough – the fallacy of local community inclusion. In line with Braun and Clarke (2012), these three themes presented a unique focus and built on the previous theme. The data structure is presented in Fig. 8.

##### 4.2.1. Theme I: Sustain the (un)sustainable – organizational efforts toward construction impact

This theme captures the efforts made by project-based organizations towards the impact of MCPs at a local community level. The movement towards a project to fulfill a societal need has been increasingly considered by policymakers, with rising schemes fostering the social sustainability and well-being of local communities and urban spaces. For example, the recent appointment of a private consortium (led by engineering company Arup) for the £3.6 billion Towns Fund program by the UK government, is a key part of the 'levelling-up' agenda to support the regeneration of communities that have not benefited equally from UK growth, by granting 100 towns access to the necessary resources to plan and manage their own public work projects. This participatory planning scheme, launched by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) in 2020, also aligns with other participatory schemes such as the Statutory Planning Act or the Community Empowerment Act in Scotland, devoted to local communities.

In line with Eskerod and Huemann (2013) and the normative concept of stakeholder theory, when discussing social sustainable practices of MCPs, common agreement between participants highlighted the importance of delivering benefits and value to a broader range of project stakeholders by identifying their real needs and expectations through engagement and inclusion. It is a common belief across interviewees that, compared to the last 10-15 years, much more effort is now put into understanding those people who will be impacted by a building project. This corresponds to greater pressure on organizations in terms of accountability and transparency in decision-making and the inclusion of project stakeholders (e.g., Freeman et al., 2007; World Economic Forum, 2020). In recent years there has been a positive shift from what organizations previously did and were expected to do, to the levels of engagement that are now achieved to foster sustainable developments by delivering social value and benefits to a broad range of stakeholders, such as local communities (Eskerod et al., 2015; Keays & Huemann, 2017).



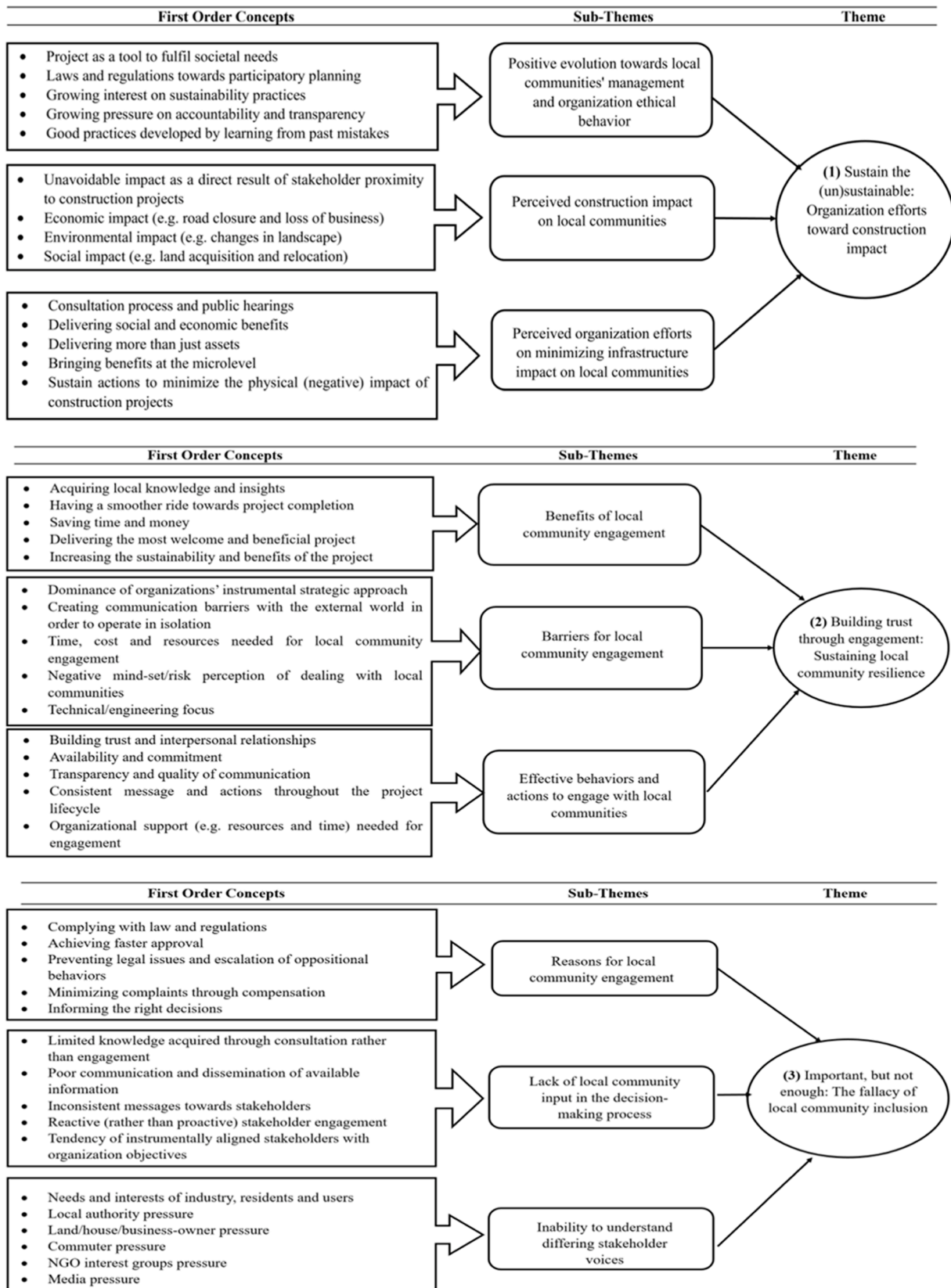


Fig. 8. Data structure.

“Compared to 15 years ago, there is an awful lot of effort into understanding those people that are going to be impacted by the build and sustain them throughout the entire project lifecycle.”

(SM5)

Although interviewees have highlighted this positive evolution towards sustainable policies and norms, and the rise of organizations' ethical commitment and care to local communities, the unavoidable negative impacts because of local communities' proximity to construction projects remains pivotal. Evidence from the interviews suggests that large infrastructure projects tend to be socially unsustainable because their long preparation and execution phases can take several years or decades before becoming operational and delivering the promised benefits. In fact, project managers tend to consider the negative consequences of such projects on local communities as exceeding the positive aspects of these developments (whose goals often materialize at a societal, rather than local level). This is mainly due to the inevitable disruption that these projects typically have in people's day-to-day lives. Some of the common negatives that emerged from interviewees included social, economic, and environmental perspectives such as noise, dust, pollution, lighting, traffic congestion, road closure and loss of business, land acquisition, relocation and unaffordable rent due to increased property values, changes in landscape, preservation of open spaces and biodiversity. These results are in line with other empirical studies (e.g., Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018; Teo & Loosemore, 2017; Xue et al., 2015), which have highlighted the challenges faced by project organizations in implementing sustainable practices and managing urban development.

“We realize we're having a massive impact on their lives and their livelihoods...We're causing those landowners pain, we know that the impact is huge, absolutely huge... Some people will lose their homes, their land. We don't deny that has terrible impact in their day-to-day lives.”

(CM7)

Based on participants' experience, feelings and reflections, organizational efforts often reflect the will of 'sustain the sustainable' by creating a vision for the project which will bring benefits at the micro level and thus respond to social, environmental and legal stakeholder pressures. The consideration of social benefits, and the ability to deliver more than just assets to a broad range of stakeholders, is nowadays a key prerequisite for project evaluation and approval. Consequently, consultation processes and public hearings are the most common mechanisms of engagement for the organization to comply with norms, policies and regulations. Results from the interviews show that project management sustainability actions are focused on minimizing the physical (negative) impact of construction developments by engaging directly with impacted local authorities and drawing micro-benefits at the local community level. However, in line with Mok et al. (2015), interviewees recognize that the agenda of large construction projects is often driven by the benefits that the project is expected to deliver in fulfilling national needs, thus making the stakeholder engagement at the local level a challenging task or simply not a priority. Results show that project managers' effort and behavior is often not perceived sufficiently by local communities.

“When a project has in its agenda the national needs, it's difficult to outline the micro-benefits to a community. Some micro-benefits are just not enough [...] We need to get to a position where the benefits of the project are seen by the local community. At the moment, we are not in that space, you see, because the benefit is macro.”

(CM8)

The effort of 'sustain the sustainable', derived from laws and regulations and transferred at the project level, might create a stakeholder involvement process mainly driven to follow the organization's statutory duty rather than to generate social acceptance through inclusive

decision-making, leading to ineffective practices. This creates barriers to some of the proactive actions designed to maximize social value for the communities, such as new forms of public procurement decisions (i.e., social contracting) advocated in both theory (e.g., Loosemore, 2016; Loosemore, Osborne, & Higgon, 2021) and practice (European Union, 2014; UK's Social Value Act, 2012), and can, in turn, generate social unrest or community resistance through collective actions against the project via petitions, protests, picketing or even vandalism (e.g., Liu et al., 2018; Oppong, Chan, & Danosh, 2017). Appendix 1 illustrates an example of the data extracts.

#### 4.2.2. Theme II: Building trust through engagement – sustaining local communities' resilience

To achieve social sustainability at the local level, large construction projects focus mainly on building trust and fostering community resilience. Community resilience is recognized as an important indicator of social sustainability (e.g., Magis, 2010), and therefore organizations' support in sustaining the needs and expectations of affected stakeholders facing the challenges brought by the construction is crucial.

The majority of participants recognized that having local community stakeholders on board from the early stages of a project is a key element of better benefits realization. A crucial factor in shaping sustainable actions is also played by the interactions between local authorities and the representatives of local community groups (e.g., local residents, NGO interest groups, landowners, commuters, users and businesses) and project organizations. These benefits include the provision of local intelligence, such as the identification of local stakeholders, and the actual issues and real needs of the local area. Interviewed managers valued very highly working closely with local authorities in the affected vicinity, as their support was considered central in designing the most welcomed and beneficial project at the local level. Indeed, the opposition of those actors could result in detrimental effects on project performance, such as legal actions leading to delays and cost overruns.

The engagement of local community groups and local authorities can be challenging, and participants identified several barriers preventing effective local community engagement and inclusion. These barriers can be linked to the predominance of an organization's instrumental approach to stakeholder management (e.g., Johnson, Scholes, & Whittington, 2005; Mitchell et al., 1997) and its link to the economic and resource-based view in which stakeholders are seen as resource providers for the organization and not *vice versa*. Interviewees highlighted that an effective and inclusive stakeholder engagement process needs organizational support through the provision of more proportionate resources during the project lifecycle. However, project-based organizations strategically aim to 'work in isolation' and often do not want their project managers to deal with the external world, instead looking at local communities as a risk, both as a source of possible delays from public consultation and a drain on resources.

“Only with a face-to-face approach of meeting people, showing your face and answering their question to dispel some of the myths and the rumor and the conjecture that goes around, can you build trust. It is time-intensive, it takes a lot of resources, but it works incredibly well [...] the thing is that organizations are often not prepared for such effort.”

(CM6)

Interviews show that delivering on time and within budget remains paramount and, because of limited project resources, especially at the front-end (Pinto & Winch, 2016), project managers are often not in a position of being able to address the concerns and needs of a broad range of stakeholders. For this reason, priority is given to those actors able to provide 'vital' resources to the project (e.g., client, sponsor, suppliers), despite the fact that not capturing 'other voices' can result in limited social benefit, especially in construction developments (Wells, 2014).

Interviewees also expressed their views about how to sustain local resilience during the construction process. One recurrent theme was the

importance of building trust and interpersonal relationships with different local actors. With local authorities as the main point of reference, socially sustainable actions from the project organization are often left to individuals. In this way, effective community management is often dependent on the members of the team involved and the organization tends to rely heavily on these individuals. Moving from the tactical to the operational level, individuals such as communication managers are those committed to building relationships, often through informal, face-to-face engagement. Individuals are called upon to build strong, interpersonal relationships and to be available in the field to provide fair treatment and high quality of available information to affected parties. It is therefore important that transitional project roles are minimized, as those relationships can get lost quickly (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018).

Participants highlighted that, in order to enhance social sustainability at the local level and thus support local community resilience, project organizations should transfer strategic goodwill to the tactical and operational levels. This will typically entail the provision of adequate support to implement actions aimed at reflecting the organization's ethical commitment to stakeholders throughout the entire project lifecycle, and not only in the pre-approval phase when broader consensus is required. Project managers should therefore allocate sufficient time and resources to achieve an effective engagement and inclusion process. Common agreement across the interviews shows that, for the inclusion process to be effective, engagement should be consistent in terms of both actions towards and communications with the affected actors.

“A consistent message and flow of information is the key. You do what you have told them, but a common issue is the one with contractors and sub-contractors. They come on quite quickly and do not engage in quite the same way, and they think differently as well.”

(PM13)

Building relationships with local communities is a time-intensive process (Di Maddaloni & Darhakshan, 2019). Being able to maintain consistency with stakeholders about what has been promised to them and what will be delivered by the project, and being consistent in communicating how this process is accomplished, is a key factor in building trust and a resilient local environment as an important indicator of social sustainability (Magis, 2010). Appendix 2 exemplifies some sub-themes with illustrative data extracts in support of the findings above.

#### 4.2.3. Theme III: Important, but not enough – the fallacy of local community inclusion

Common feelings among interviewees showed that, despite the importance of engaging local communities to enhance benefits realization and social sustainability, this is still not considered a priority and local community inclusion in the project decision-making process remains marginal. To achieve organizational goals, participants pointed out how the stakeholder engagement effort at the local level is higher in the pre-approval phase of the projects, because this is the stage when hostility from affected parties is higher (e.g., Aaltonen, Kujala, Havela, & Savage, 2015). This often results in limited resources for stakeholder engagement being invested into the pre-approval phase of MCPs in order to comply with law and regulations (e.g., the statutory Planning Act in the UK), and thus achieving faster approval. It has been noted that through the often-required consultation process with all affected parties, project managers strategically aim to prevent legal issues (e.g., petitions) and the escalation of oppositional behaviors which might translate into delays, cost overruns, and reputational damage.

“The purpose of consultation is mainly to try and arrive at the bill process with the smallest number of petitions so we can achieve a faster approval.”

(CM1)

Those directly impacted often have an opinion on the construction development in their proximity and, although this opinion might be guided by personal drivers (e.g., emotional attachment), participants confirmed that the effort devoted to the involvement process is often not enough to identify the needs and expectations of local communities. The local knowledge acquired through a process which mainly focuses on consultation rather than inclusion is limited. Collecting and taking on board different needs and expectations requires ongoing communication and a consistent flow of available information throughout the entire project lifecycle (Eskerod & Larsen, 2018). However, organizations are often defensive in communications with their local stakeholders, and not proactive in supplying them with information, engaging with them for mutual benefits, or including them in a shared journey. In fact, in response to stakeholders' pressure, major engagement actions are often designed to prevent problems by responding to those “*who are the loudest and create the most pain*” (PM3), and “*seek to compensate people for disruption merely in order to prevent potential legal issues*” (SM5). This reactive behavior towards local stakeholders naturally leads to an instrumental (rather than normative) approach which aims to make the stakeholder comply with the project needs, seeing them as the means by which the organization can achieve their project objectives (Biesenthal & Wilden, 2014).

Although an organization's default position at the tactical and operational level is often one of reacting to events rather than being proactive, the beliefs and feelings of the interviewees highlighted that it should be the responsibility of project and communication managers to capture and manage these ‘often disregarded’ opinions in order to achieve a clearer explanation of the organization's objectives and the benefits that the project aims to deliver at a societal level. Interviewees explained that organizations often have little time or resources during the conceptual and planning phase of the project to understand different stakeholder views or to include their voices into the decision-making process. Although it is expected that at some point of the project lifecycle the organization will face pressure from legitimate components of the local community (such as industry, users and residents' representatives, which are all linked with local authorities), objectives are often seen to be fixed and decided at the corporate level with little chance of being scrutinized by these groups.

“We have objectives set at the front end and we work in that direction. Sometimes the organization does everything possible to sell off the project and align stakeholders to these objectives. We tend not to hear contrasting voices as these can lead to unnecessary re-work and delays.”

(PM22)

As other scholars have found (e.g., Aaltonen & Kujala, 2010; Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018; Olander & Landin, 2008), the analysis reveals that local communities can inform and sometimes influence project decision-makers, especially before project approval, yet often they possess little or no power to change project scope and objectives. Rare are the occasions when external voices are equally considered in the decision-making process when compared to the needs and requests of ‘vital’ stakeholders (e.g., sponsors, clients, suppliers) (Freeman et al., 2007). This often results in an unbalanced perspective and the inability to carry out effective, sustainable actions towards legitimate, affected parties. Appendix 3 illustrates an example of the data extracts.

## 5. Discussion

It is undisputed in project management theory and practice that stakeholder proactive engagement is crucial for organizations to achieve their purpose and goals (e.g., Business Roundtable, 2019; Di Maddaloni & Derakhshan, 2019; Eskerod & Huemann, 2013; Keeys & Huemann, 2017; World Economic Forum, 2020). Survey and interviews show how social sustainable practices in MCPs (to engage and include local communities in the decision-making process) are not yet mature and deserve



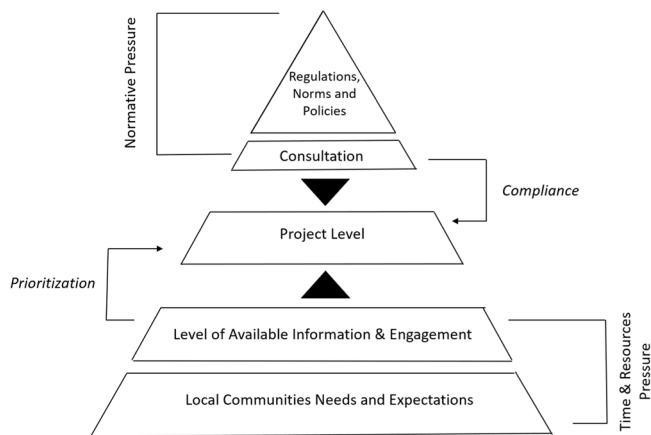


Fig. 9. Challenges of local communities' inclusion in project decision-making.

much more attention. In short, MCPs are constrained by institutional pressure on the one hand, and the limited allocated time/resources to cope with the rising voices of legitimate stakeholders clamouring for greater attention on the other (Fig. 9).

At the project level, both the normative pressure (top-down) and time/resources pressure required for extended engagement (bottom-up) leads project managers to adopt an instrumental approach towards stakeholder prioritization and management, preventing the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders in the decision-making process. This effectively makes stakeholders comply with project needs, and thus reinforces the dominance of the organization-centric perspective discussed in stakeholder theory (e.g., Bondy & Charles, 2018; Derakhshan et al., 2019b; Miles, 2017; Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

The findings that emerged from our qualitative and quantitative study explain this context through the *means-ends decoupling* concept (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). Indeed, the general concept of *decoupling* in organization (Meyer & Rowman, 1977) describes a firm which respond to societal expectations by adopting formal structures without implementing corresponding practices (Graafland & Smid, 2019; Meyer & Rowman, 1977). Strategy scholars have emphasized decoupling as a form of calculated deception to detach policy from practice. Firms, however, are composed of individuals with their own perceptions and interests, and decoupling does not happen only between implemented actions and firms' goals (Bromley & Power, 2012), but also between actions and intentions at the micro-level of the organizational life (Wijen, 2014), offering an interesting interplay between individual behaviors and project structure.

In this respect, the *means-ends decoupling* has recently received academic attention in the business and management context (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Stål & Corvellec, 2022; Wijen, 2014) as it describes a situation where, in response to institutional pressures, organizations engage in activities that are weakly aligned to their goals and turn out to be mainly ineffective (Wijen, 2014). The *means-ends decoupling* perspective has not yet been applied in project studies. However, building on Wijen (2014), we find that project organizations tend to develop policies aligned with norms and regulations, though the outcome of these policies is poor. Indeed, we find that adoption of compliance to regulation toward local communities does not lead to effective social sustainable standards in practice (normative pressure as in Fig. 10). This also connects with Bromley and Powell (2012), indicating organizations which simply comply with their formal policies may not, or may barely, achieve the very objectives that developers and implementers of these policies envisage.

To explain this, we argue that rules, regulations and policies (i.e., normative pressure) are responsible for project organizations beginning involvement (consultation) with local stakeholders. Yet, these practices give rise to a means-ends decoupling where project managers try to

implement socio-environmental standards (e.g., social sustainability practices and stakeholder engagement) to ensure substantive compliance although these are not the main priority of the focal organization (Wijen, 2014). Forces leading to decoupling are diverse; decoupling takes into account how both the internal organization and external environment of firms interact in shaping their responses to stakeholder pressures (Crilly, Zollo, & Hansen, 2012). However, very often project managers have to make sense of the environmental pressures that their organizations face, and there is no guarantee that their perceptions will converge (Fiss & Zajac, 2004). Thus, we discover that project managers mainly activate simple consultations with local communities, that are largely ineffective, to include their voices into the decision-making of MCPs. In this way, project managers keep their dominant position as decision-makers who act in the best interest of all stakeholders (e.g., Derakhshan et al., 2019b; Eskerod & Huemann, 2013), leading to instrumentally prioritizing some actors, e.g., client, suppliers, over others, e.g., local communities (prioritization as in Fig. 9).

Moreover, targeting stakeholders' inclusion into the decision-making process, along with the other multiple MCP constraints increases trade-offs (Sabini & Alderman, 2021) and complexity (Sabini & Silvius, 2023). To deal with these convergent and contradictory pressures, our data show that the project organization decouples its formal structure (*means*) from their practices (*ends*), so that structures align with institutional pressures, i.e., normative compliance, whereas practices respond to efficiency needs, i.e., operating within the given limited time and resources for external stakeholder engagement (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Although the survey revealed that MCPs tend to have higher consideration of local communities compared to other industries, qualitative interviews revealed that increasing effort is required by project organizations to minimize the detrimental effects of MCP developments at the local level. A positive trend that has been recognized and reinforced by interviewees relates to the many normative schemes proposed to foster social sustainability and participatory planning in MCPs (e.g., the Statutory Planning Act or Community Empowerment Act). However, these schemes turned to put pressure on the project organization unable to exploit the social opportunities that these schemes are intended to deliver. Here, a stronger alignment should be found by the project organization between their goals and the fast-changing norms and regulations to avoid the persistence of means-ends decoupling leading to ineffective social sustainable actions.

The narrative emerging from the interviews shows that attention needs to be directed towards local communities, yet a consistent number of respondents from the survey (40%) do not engage these stakeholders in their projects. Surprisingly, one-fifth of the sample considered local communities not relevant and almost a quarter is explicitly not engaging with them. The follow-up interviews reveal that the *fallacy of local community inclusion* often happens at a strategic level, since project organizations tend to be reactive to stakeholder claims rather than proactive, not including their voices in order to shape the most beneficial project for the communities (e.g., Derakhshan, 2020; Di Maddaloni & Davis 2018). This aligns with the scarcity of time and resources that project organizations allocate, especially in the planning phase of the project (Pinto & Winch, 2016), highlighting how the engagement of external stakeholders is weakly linked to the organization's goals and is often strategically instrumental (Kujala et al., 2022).

In summary, we highlighted the means-ends decoupling between what project managers perceive to be moral (including communities) versus what project organizations actually do (not including them) as an additional explanation of the marginal external stakeholder inclusion in projects. By introducing and advancing the means-ends decoupling theory in project studies, we highlighted how it contributes to being an additional barrier for the effective implementation of the normative formulation of stakeholder theory in practice. The discrepancy between normative theory and current project social sustainable actions is thus driven by a *means-ends decoupling* situation where project managers, in an attempt to respond to convergent pressures, engage in activities that



are weakly linked to their goals (i.e., external stakeholder engagement) and turn out to be largely ineffective. Hence, in practice, the local community inclusion in the decision-making process of MCPs falls short due to an instrumental stakeholder management approach.

## 6. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to understand the current barriers to external stakeholder inclusion in MCPs and thus to the effective implementation of sustainable social practices from a normative stakeholder theory perspective. This empirical work provides several contributions to the project management body of knowledge from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

First, we contribute to the project sustainability discourse by critically assessing one aspect of social sustainability, i.e., stakeholder inclusion (e.g., [Baba et al., 2021](#); [Eskerood & Huemann, 2013](#); [Keeyes & Huemann, 2017](#); [Silvius & Huemann, 2017](#)). Our empirical evidence shows perceptions and actions toward the external (and often disregarded) stakeholders, such as local communities. Therefore, we uncover challenges and barriers preventing project stakeholder inclusion by unveiling how fast-moving regulations and limited time and resources available for external stakeholder engagement, drive *means-ends decoupling* situations ([Bromley & Power, 2012](#)). We introduce the means-ends decoupling in project studies as a powerful perspective to understand and conceptualize the discrepancy between what project managers perceive to be moral (including communities), versus what project organizations actually do (not including them), by elucidating the reasons behind this. Thus, we advance the means-ends discourse from a temporary organizing perspective.

Second, by framing the study through the normative stance of stakeholder theory and positioning our study among it (e.g., [Freeman et al., 2007, 2010](#)), we demonstrate that normative practices in MCPs are far from being mature. Despite the growing claim towards local communities' engagement, this study demonstrates that an inclusive approach from a normative perspective is still not yet mature and organizations engagement efforts remain mainly instrumental despite the recent institutional pressures from both governments and policy makers (e.g., Statutory Planning Act or the Community Empowerment Act). Organizational engagement towards local stakeholders is predominantly compliance-driven ([Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2018](#); [Teo & Loosemore, 2017](#); [van den Ende & van Marrewijk, 2019](#)). This causes project organizations to detach social considerations from their strategic project priorities in order to achieve short-term benefits (i.e., obtaining project approval through consultation rather than active engagement), giving rise to a means-ends decoupling situation. We explain that the limbo within which project managers operate reinforces the exclusion of those local communities, and thus prevents a comprehensive inclusion of these legitimate voices in the decision-making process ([Meadowcroft, 2013](#); [Rickards et al., 2014](#); [World Economic Forum, 2020](#); [Zeemering, 2018](#)). However, gaps remain in how project organizations should adopt an inclusive approach towards their local communities, and how they can acknowledge their concerns and values to foster social sustainable project processes and outcomes.

Third, we contribute to the project external stakeholder inclusion discourse, supporting the many studies highlighting the importance of external actors on project performance, but also demonstrating that still MCPs are rarely managed with effective and consistent stakeholder engagement mechanisms that are likely to improve sustainability and thus the quality of the projects in which the communities live ([Baba et al., 2021](#); [Di Maddaloni & Derakhshan, 2019](#); [Keeyes & Huemann, 2017](#)). We assert that project organizations decouple their behaviour from stated commitments as a result of uncoordinated attempts to respond to diverse and conflicting demands. The recorded discrepancy between normative moral aspiration and current practices at the project level highlights that convergent pressures and reactive mechanisms do not allow project organizations to embrace a proper external

stakeholder engagement (doing *with*), leading to participation and inclusiveness. In fact, community inclusion is still a myth despite the growing body of literature recognising local communities as an important class of project stakeholders ([Derakhshan, 2020](#); [Derry, 2012](#); [Nguyen, Chileshe, Rameezdeen, & Wood, 2019](#)). This study contributes to reinforcing the need for external stakeholders to be an active part of the project development as a way to achieve social value and benefits realization in MCPs. Departing from this perspective, project organizations should better align their goals (and resources) with emerging institutional pressures in order to implement effective actions.

The results of this research also provide practical implications for project organizations in making more informed decisions as they better capitalize on the support of local communities. We highlight that the interplay between external environment and internal organization matter in terms of whether project managers implement or decouple policy as well as how they go about doing so. By seeking a normative commitment to a broad range of stakeholders, organizations face the struggle of reinforcing accountability and the inclusion of 'new voices' that comprise multiple actors in their decision-making. The challenges of coping with both normative pressures towards greater inclusion of local communities, and the limited resources and time allocated within organizations hinders such effort. To address these challenges project organizations must shape project benefits together with local stakeholders.

Therefore, this paper also advances our understanding of the benefits and barriers for an effective application of the normative stance of stakeholder theory, and the ways in which local community inclusion can be better enhanced in response to the social sustainability challenges of MCPs. The research contributes to direct the future efforts of scholars and practitioners towards an analysis of the links between the quality of local government, construction investments, and stakeholder inclusion in the decision-making process ([Cantarelli, Flyvbjerg, & Molin, 2010](#); [Crescenzi, Di Cataldo, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2016](#)). Future research efforts might wish to investigate how knowledge-sharing between projects and local authorities, from a normative and inclusive stakeholder approach, might relieve the pressures that project organizations are facing nowadays and foster the sustainable outcomes of MCPs by avoiding means-ends decoupling situations. Future studies could also delve deeper into the cognitions and interpretations/values of project managers and assess what kinds of implications these have on the strategies that project organizations enact in engaging local communities. Thus, investigating the microfoundations of decoupling as insitutional response and, in particular, on the interaction of insitutional pressures and cognition centered on power and objective interests ([Crilly et al., 2012](#)).

Certain limitations inherent to the study design and implementation should be considered in the interpretation of the study's conclusions and related methodological observations. First, due to the inductive nature of the study, the *means-ends decoupling* emerged as a compelling perspective which provided more complete and insightful answers to the research questions. However, a deeper investigation is needed to develop this emerging theoretical perspective. Here, institutional theory and the behavioral theory of the firm share some similar assumptions about actors' bounded rationality ([Argote & Greve, 2007](#)). Opportunities are open to link these research streams to identify the microfoundations of institutional response to the normative pressures that project organizations are increasingly facing nowadays.

Second, in the quantitative study phase, a self-developed survey instrument was used; although its reliability was relatively high, construct validity through factor analysis remains to be established. An important limitation of the survey is connected to practitioners' responses, which were based on their own perceptions and beliefs. Moreover, three-quarters of the respondents were based in Europe, which limits the generalizability of the findings to different national contexts. Although prior engagement in construction projects was assessed, these factors were not controlled for statistically. Finally, the qualitative interviews

that took place (n.23) were all based in Europe, and mostly in the UK. As the research questions pertaining to the empirical data collection and analysis were concerned with project managers’ perceptions of the stakeholder local community and project management social sustainable procedures, this suggests a need for comparison with other geographical settings and industries to enhance the robustness of the

illustrated results as the influence of the institutional/country context might provide additional illuminating insights. Despite these limitations, it is believed that the quality of the meta-inferences in a sequential QUAN→QUAL mixed methods design is reliable and useful (Appendix 4).

**APPENDIX 1. - Theme I: Sustain the (un)sustainable – organizational efforts toward infrastructure and construction impact**

Sub-Theme	Code <i>FULLFILLING SOCIETAL NEEDS</i>	Code <i>LAWS AND REGULATIONS</i>	Code <i>GROWING SUSTAINABILITY PRACTICES</i>	Code <i>TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY</i>	Code <i>LEARNING FROM PAST MISTAKES</i>
Positive evolution towards local community management and organizations’ ethical behavior	They (infrastructure and construction megaprojects) are much more about social and economic benefits, rather than just moving people faster or moving goods or whatever... You have got to start to have that vision and start to think about reading the project differently, and I suppose to sell it by involving the local communities around in order to fulfill their real needs (PM19).	There is a statutory duty to engage with our direct impacted local authorities and this transfers to the organization considerable pressure... We don’t do it just because the law now says we have to; we believe it is right (CM7).	Compared to 15 years ago, there is an awful lot of effort into understanding those people that are going to be impacted by the build and sustain them throughout the entire project lifecycle (SM5).	In the past, contractors washed their hands of the community [...] in the last years there has been a shift between what previously agency did and expected, and the level of transparency and engagement that is now achieved (CM4).	I think what we have learned most is just the communication bit. You have to talk to people. You have to do it early and transparently so they have time to respond. You have to give them some opportunity to talk to you during the process so that they don’t feel lost on the way. And just be honest, keep what you promised (PM20).
Sub-Theme	Code <i>UNVOIDABLE IMPACT DUE TO PROXIMITY</i>	Code <i>ECONOMIC IMPACT</i>	Code <i>ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT</i>	Code <i>SOCIAL IMPACT</i>	-
Perceived infrastructure and construction impact on local communities	Since we have such a short time to build in, we are using 24 hours a day, which means that those who live closest to us get light on their rooms, they get noise, dust and pollution. They have to have the feeling that we are doing it in the best way we can for them and that we care...But, inevitably, it hurts the most when you are close to it (PM20).	Those that benefit from the infrastructure are not the same people as the people who suffer the infrastructure. We can close a road and there is no payment, but there is an impact on businesses and commuters (CM1).	The biggest impact that large construction projects have on local communities, I would say, is environmental at the moment of execution. Large construction projects do affect the environment in terms of changes in the landscape, sound, dust, traffic. So in a way they interrupt in how daily life goes on at the local level (PM21).	We realize we’re having a massive impact on their lives and their livelihoods...We’re causing those landowners pain, we know that the impact is huge, absolutely huge... Some people will lose their homes, their land. We don’t deny that has terrible impact in their day-to-day lives (CM7).	
Sub-Theme	Code <i>CONSULTATION AND PUBLIC HEARINGS</i>	Code <i>DELIVERING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS</i>	Code <i>DELIVERING MORE THAN ASSETS</i>	Code <i>BRINGING BENEFITS AT THE MICRO LEVEL</i>	Code <i>ACTIONS TO MINIMIZE IMPACT</i>
Perceived organization efforts on minimizing infrastructure impact on local communities	Historically we were just at community events and parish events, but there was always kind of a hidden political agenda behind it... We have now found the need for a lot of one-to-one meetings, so going out to people’s houses, and we found that it was okay. It was quite difficult, it was quite revolting in places, but it was good to get their individual concerns (CM11).	As soon as we understand that the real value of the project is not just the basic utility of the infrastructure, but it’s actually about the economic and the social development opportunity it presents, then I think you are into a world where you have to engage the community (SM5).	So rather than just construction arriving, walking away, and leaving just a road behind, we want to leave something more than a road... There is a need of delivering much more than just asset (CM4).	When a project has in its agenda the national needs, it’s difficult to outline the micro-benefits to a community. Some micro-benefits are just not enough [...] We need to get to a position where the benefits of the project is seen by the local community. At the moment we are not in that space, you see, because the benefit is macro (CM8).	It’s important that when you build your project you set aside some money for the locals. But a project can be better sustained when is needed. We have to focus heavily on the question, “Why?” in terms of why are we doing this project. If we do not start asking why, then we keep on doing political projects that are not necessarily good for the local community (PM21).

**APPENDIX 2. - Theme II illustrative data extract (direct quotes)**

Sub-Theme	Code <i>ACQUIRING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE</i>	Code <i>SMOOTH RIDE TOWARDS COMPLETION</i>	Code <i>SAVING TIME AND MONEY</i>	Code <i>DELIVERING THE MOST BENEFICIAL PROJECT</i>	Code <i>INCREASED SUSTAINABILITY AND BENEFITS</i>
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Sub-Theme	Code <b>ACQUIRING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE</b>	Code <b>SMOOTH RIDE TOWARDS COMPLETION</b>	Code <b>SAVING TIME AND MONEY</b>	Code <b>DELIVERING THE MOST BENEFICIAL PROJECT</b>	Code <b>INCREASED SUSTAINABILITY AND BENEFITS</b>
Benefits of local community engagement	I was in charge of the participatory process with the aim of discussing alternative solutions for the metro line. What emerged was the incredible knowledge of the local area possessed by local authorities and landowners, which led us to rethink our planning assumptions (SM23).	It's going to give you a smoother ride. You are not going to have the strength of opposition if you involve people (CM17).	The amount of cost and effort applied to dealing with community groups that don't want the project there is huge. So by having that agreement from the community that it's acceptable can absolutely make the project run smoother, quicker and is financially more viable (CM8).	It's all about bringing people together. We need a raft of different skills and we need to bring things from other disciplines. What we build is often different to what is needed. You have to put people at the front and center of it in order to develop the most beneficial project (PM10).	It is definitely the right thing to do and the right thing to try and, you know, spread the benefits wider than what we have done in the past in order to really deliver what is needed and being truly sustainable towards the most affected parties (CM4).
Sub-Theme	Code <b>INSTRUMENTAL STRATEGIC APPROACH</b>	Code <b>CREATING COMMUNICATION BARRIERS</b>	Code <b>EFFORT REQUIRED</b>	Code <b>NEGATIVE MINDSET</b>	Code <b>TECHNICAL/ENGINEERING FOCUS</b>
Barriers for local community engagement	Objectives have always remained the same, having agreed those with the sponsor regardless of the stakeholder engagement, externally. This gave a firm foundation to all our negotiation [...] Stakeholders' needs have to be developed on the back of the design, not the other way around (CM14).	The organization created a department, which created a buffer. ... They don't want their project managers dealing with local communities, because it's going to drive them crazy. They are seen as an irritant and something to deal with rather than something to engage with (SM2).	Only with a face-to-face approach of meeting people, showing your face and answering their question to dispel some of the myths and the rumor and the conjecture that goes around, can you build trust. It is time-intensive, it takes a lot of resources, but it works incredibly well [...] the thing is that organizations are often not prepared for such effort (CM6).	But if you look at it (local communities), they are seen as an irritant and something to deal with rather than something to engage with (PM10).	Engineers are a lot of things and they are very, very smart and clever people and technical people, as are project managers, but they are not always the best people in terms of thinking through things like sustainability and social issues like community engagement and communication (SM5).
Sub-Theme	Code <b>BUILDING TRUST</b>	Code <b>AVAILABILITY AND COMMITMENT</b>	Code <b>TRANSPARENCY AND QUALITY OF INFORMATION</b>	Code <b>CONSISTENT MESSAGE AND ACTIONS</b>	Code <b>ORGANIZATION SUPPORT</b>
Effective behavior and actions to deal with the local community	I think it is all about building trust, going out and talking to people, and answering questions that generate trust (PM3).	You can't just be an email address in London, there is a need for project managements to live locally or commute three or four days a week. You have to stay in touch as people get very anxious when you get silent (SM16).	But when you are in construction, the key thing is not surprises. And then you make sure that even if it's going to be horrible, they know about it in advance by providing good quality information (CM1).	A consistent message is the key. You do what you have told them, but a common issue is the one with contractors and sub-contractors. They come on quite quickly and do not engage in quite the same way, and they think differently as well (PM13).	Organizations should provide time and resources for engagement. Resources for engagement are often very limited. More time should be invested in listening and taking local communities along the journey, understanding what people can add to it (CM11).

**APPENDIX 3. - Illustrative data extract (direct quotes and percentage of themes coded)**

Sub-Theme	Code <b>COMPLY WITH LAW</b>	Code <b>ACHIEVE FASTER APPROVAL</b>	Code <b>PREVENT OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIOURS</b>	Code <b>MINIMIZE COMPLAINTS THROUGH COMPENSATIONS</b>	Code <b>INFORM THE RIGHT DECISION</b>
Reasons for local community engagement	In the past we've just kind of cracked on with the project. But here it was really because of the necessity of the statutory planning that you really need evidence to the public enquiry that you have consulted everybody... We were particularly concerned about that and focused on that (PM13).	The purpose of consultation is mainly to try and arrive at the bill process with the smallest number of petitions so we can achieve a faster approval (CM1).	Those who are the loudest and create the most pain generally get paid attention to (PM3).	We are looking at how can we appropriately compensate people for the disruption or inconvenience, rather than procreativity look to the positives to enhance the local community (SM5).	The decision isn't for the local community and duty-bound I want to reach out to the local community and the other stakeholders to get opinions that will help to inform the right decision (CM9).
Sub-Theme	Code <b>CONSULTATION RATHER THAN ENGAGEMENT</b>	Code <b>POOR DISSEMINATION OF AVAILABLE INFORMATION</b>	Code <b>INCONSISTENT MESSAGE TOWARDS STAKEHOLDERS</b>	Code <b>REACTIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT</b>	Code <b>ALIGNMENT OF STAKEHOLDERS WITH OBJECTIVES</b>

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Sub-Theme	Code <b>COMPLY WITH LAW</b>	Code <b>ACHIEVE FASTER APPROVAL</b>	Code <b>PREVENT OPPOSITIONAL BEHAVIOURS</b>	Code <b>MINIMIZE COMPLAINTS THROUGH COMPENSATIONS</b>	Code <b>INFORM THE RIGHT DECISION</b>
Lack of local community input in the decision-making process	We need to differentiate between consultation and engagement. Organizations are often pushed towards consultation because it's more time- and cost-effective. Engagement comes down to individuals and it is resource-draining. You got the personal relationship to work because you took the time to understand and trust one another and to understand the different motivations (PM10).	In the past it was not mandatory to disclose project documentation, but you will start fighting with people if you do not provide them available information. Your job becomes much harder if you have to fight people every day because they are not aware or they don't know where to go (CM14).	Consistency has been the thing that has brought their (local communities) concerns down. Having the same face all the time will help to better capture their needs and expectations. However, this is very difficult in a project that has transient people moving through, limiting the input that local communities can provide at the project level (CM1).	We do not spend sufficient time on stakeholder management, and we react to the events rather than being proactive at the front end [...] Organizations have external pressures they have to respond to, but the default position is to be passive, and where possible reactive, rather than proactive (SM12).	We have objective set at the front end and we work in that direction. Sometimes the organization does everything possible to sell off the project and align stakeholders to these objectives. We tend not to hear contrasting voices as these can lead to unnecessary re-work and delays (PM22).
Sub-Theme	Code <b>NEEDS AND INTERESTS OF INDUSTRY, RESIDENTS AND USERS</b>	Code <b>LOCAL AUTHORITY PRESSURE</b>	Code <b>LAND/HOUSE/BUSINESS OWNERS PRESSURE</b>	Code <b>COMMUTERS PRESSURE</b>	Code <b>NGO'S AND MEDIA PRESSURE</b>
Inability to understand differing stakeholders' voices	I think their (the local communities) prime interest is, "What are you going to do for me?", and this is common across industry, residents and users, which all have different needs and expectations (PM3).	First thing is to get the local authority on side and understand their concerns because when you have a borough opposing the project, then it is very, very difficult. (CM14).	Getting agreement from the land, house and business owners very much depends on the tangible benefits that's brought. They knew there was money there (CM8).	I think it's very disruptive. The construction process is invariably disruptive to commuters' lives due to extended journey times. It's normal they put pressure for getting back to normality (SM16).	If they (local communities) don't get on the front foot and get their message out first, then the local press, media and NGOs will get a message out that perhaps isn't in line with either reality or the message they'd like to portray (PM3).

**Appendix 4. – Survey questions**

1. What was the main focus of the project? (Participants needed to select the main component best describing the end result of your project)

- Aviation ICT
- Real estate
- Consultancy
- Infrastructure
- Rural development
- Energy
- Organization consultancy
- Transport
- Engineering
- Procurement & contracts
- Urban development
- Environmental Product development
- Financial
- Other

2. What is the level of engagement of the following stakeholder regarding the integration of sustainability in the process of the project? – participants need to select a range from 'low or no engagement', 'medium engagement', 'high engagement', 'not relevant' for the following stakeholders:

- Project Board
- Direct manager
- Leading organization
- Client/Project owner
- Contractor(s)
- Designer
- Local community
- Funder
- Regulator
- Other



3. Did the project involve... ? (participants need to select a range from 'Yes, very much', 'Yes, to some extent', 'No', 'I have no idea')

- formal policies about sustainable business practices?
- clear defined KPI for sustainability?
- scheduled checks on sustainability practices?
- scheduled reports of sustainability performance?
- scheduled reports of sustainability performance to external stakeholders, such as contractors, investors, local community?
- strategies to improve sustainability performance?

4. To what extent did you use the following measures in your last concluded project? (participants needed to indicate the degree of usage reflecting each statement below: 'N/A Not applicable' to from '1 – Not at all used' to '7 – Extremely used')

- Reported project (progress) reflecting indicators of environmental and/or social sustainability
- Took into account the financial benefits originating from environmental and social good practices
- Offered local stakeholder access to project information
- Supported ethical behaviour (fair trade, competition and anti-crime policies, codes of conduct, etc.)
- Sponsored and/or supported at least one community action or group
- Avoided negative impacts on local communities

5. Benefits to sustainable business practices – In my project, sustainable business practices were most likely to be implemented because they... (participants needed to indicate the degree of usage reflecting each statement below: 'N/A Not applicable' to from '1 – Not at all used' to '7 – Extremely used')

- Were recommended from other project partners and/or stakeholders
- Reduced negative impacts on social, cultural and ecological environment
- Improved the relationship with the local community

6. Barriers to sustainable business practices – In your project, how relevant were the following barriers to the implementation of sustainable business practices? ... (participants needed to indicate the degree of usage reflecting each statement below: 'N/A Not applicable' to from '1 – Not at all relevant' to '7 – Extremely relevant')

- Lack of support and information from other stakeholders in the project
- Limited public awareness with regard to the need for sustainability

## Appendix 5. – Interview guide

### CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION: POPULATION PROFILE.

- Q1. Can you confirm that you have been involved in one or more major infrastructure projects since their conceptual and/or planning phase?
- Q2. Where and when did the project you have in mind take place?
- Q3. Could you provide information about the budget, schedule and scope assigned to the project?
- Q4. Tell me about the aims, objectives and perceived benefits set at the front-end for the project.
- Q5. Do you feel enough time has been spent at the conceptual and planning phase of the project? Why?
- Q6. What were your responsibilities in the project?

### KEY THEMES:

#### 1. SOCIAL SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES AND STAKEHOLDER'S IDENTIFICATION & PRIORITIZATION

- Q7. In relation to the project we're talking about, can you think about different stakeholders groups you have been engaged with at the front-end of the project?
- Q8. In relation to the project we're talking about, there were sustainable objectives and targets in places?
- Q9. In relation to the project we're talking about, which social sustainable practice were devoted to stakeholders groups you have identified? Why?
- Q10. Which of the stakeholders groups that you identified have been prioritised in terms of different request and needs? Why was that?
- Q11. From the stakeholders groups you identified, what was their attitude to the project as it progressed? Can you identify reasons for that? (*positive or negative attitudes*).
- Q12. Which of those stakeholder groups had a positive or negative impact on project objectives? Why do you think this happened?

#### 2. UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER

- Q13. How would you describe the local community stakeholder in the context of major construction projects?
- Q14. Which of the local community groups have you worked with during the front end of the project life cycle?
- Q15. In relation to the project we're talking about, how engaged were the local community groups you mentioned in the project?
- Q16. Which of these groups have had a positive or negative attitude as the project progressed? Why?

### 3. MCPs IMPACT & STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AT THE LOCAL COMMUNITY LEVEL

**Q17.** In relation to the project we're talking about, do you feel the needs and expectation of the local community have been clearly identified throughout the project life cycle? Why?

**Q18.** What was the organization sustainable strategies to engage this group (the local community) and how did you deal with the impacts that MCPs typically has on the local community?

**Q19.** Do you think your approach and actions worked well to help progress the project and deliver benefits to a broader range of stakeholders (e.g. external stakeholders)? Why do you think this was?

**Q20.** What were the main reasons for engaging with the local community stakeholders and related challenges in starting and maintaining such engagement?

### 4. LOCAL COMMUNITY INPUT IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF MCPs

**Q21.** How do you think engaging the local community can help to enhance the social sustainability of MCPs and transparency and accountability in decision making? Why do you think this?

**Q22.** Do you feel enough attention has been paid to involve and engage the local community in the decision-making process from the front end of the project? Do you think this was necessary?

**Q23.** Do you think that including the local community in the decision-making process can help to better benefits realizations and sustainable outcomes? If yes, how would you do so? If not, why do you think so?

**Q24.** What lessons do you think are to be learned, in terms of understanding local community needs, expectations and their inclusion in the decision-making of sustainable MCPs?

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