

**Beyond Policy: Determinants of
Stakeholder Engagement in Namibian
Town Councils' Development
Initiatives**



Research Article

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Abstract

Introduction: Stakeholder engagement is a critical determinant of successful Local Economic Development (LED) in sub-Saharan Africa. While policy frameworks prescribe participation, this study examines the contextual determinants shaping engagement in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils in the Ohangwena Region of Namibia.

Methodology: Guided by a pragmatist paradigm and endogenous development theory, a convergent parallel mixed-methods design combined a structured survey (n = 62, 95% response rate) measuring perceived barriers with 16 focus group discussions (FGDs) involving community members, officials, and civic and private representatives. Descriptive statistics identified common obstacles, and thematic analysis of FGDs explored institutional capacity, trust, socioeconomic incentives, and participatory culture. The findings from both strands were integrated to produce a practical framework.

Results: Survey respondents most frequently cited unemployment and funding constraints (66.6%) as barriers to engagement, with insufficient technical training and

weak stakeholder coordination each being reported by 27.3%. The FGDs revealed four primary determinants: institutional capacity and coordination, trust and transparency, socioeconomic incentives, and participatory culture. Helao Nafidi showed stronger institutional coordination and more inclusive mechanisms; Eenhana relied on community-driven efforts but faced resource limits that curtailed sustained engagement. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data indicated that effective engagement requires the convergence of institutional quality, economic viability, and cultural responsiveness; structural constraints, such as unemployment, can undermine participation even when formal structures exist.

Conclusion: This study proposes a pragmatist stakeholder engagement framework of eight interconnected pillars, including trust building, resource alignment, clear institutional roles, cultural responsiveness, participatory structures, targeted support, inclusive voice building, and learning, and argues that LED success depends on locally grounded, evidence-based governance that moves beyond policy compliance.

Key Words: Beyond policy, Stakeholders Engagement, Namibia, Town Council Development

1. Introduction

1.1 Global Context: Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainable Development

Globally, stakeholder engagement has been recognised as a fundamental driver of sustainable

development and inclusive economic growth (Ansell & Gash, 2008; United

Nations, 2020). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals, emphasise the critical importance of multistakeholder collaboration in achieving development outcomes. International evidence from Europe, Asia, and North America demonstrates that meaningful engagement depends not only on formal policy frameworks but also on

contextual factors such as institutional trust, socioeconomic incentives, and participatory culture (Handley & Howell-Moroney, 2022). Minkler and Wallerstein (2012) highlight that community-based participatory approaches in North America have led to initiatives that reflect genuine community needs and priorities. Similarly, studies from developed economies show that transparent decision-making processes and inclusive governance structures enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of development initiatives (Ansell & Gash, 2008). This global discourse underscores the necessity of moving beyond policy prescriptions to examine the contextual determinants that shape meaningful participation.

1.2 Sub-Saharan African Context: Decentralization and Institutional Challenges

Across sub-Saharan Africa, decentralisation reforms have aimed to strengthen local governments and expand citizen involvement in development processes (Ayee, 2019). However, weak institutional capacity, elite capture, and resource

constraints often undermine these efforts (Mkhize and Mutereko, 2022). Positive examples from Ghana and Kenya demonstrate that community ownership and endogenous approaches, where development is guided by local priorities and indigenous knowledge, are vital for sustaining participation (Oduro-Ofori, 2011). Sutherland et al. (2014) illustrate how local development agencies in Sub-Saharan Africa serve as intermediaries, bridging the gap between local communities and governmental bodies. Pillay et al. (2012) document that South African municipalities have achieved stronger LED outcomes by building partnerships among stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and government agencies. These experiences reinforce the relevance of applying both the pragmatism paradigm, which emphasizes practical solutions and context-specific outcomes, and endogenous development theory, which foregrounds locally driven processes.

1.3 Namibian Context: Policy Mandates and Implementation Gaps

In Namibia, town councils are mandated to lead Local Economic Development initiatives under the Local Authorities Act (Act No. 23 of 1992) and the Decentralisation Enabling Act (Act No. 33 of 2000). The Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (MURD) established the Local Economic Development Agency (LEDA) to coordinate and support LED initiatives at the municipal level (MURD, 2024). However, research indicates that many councils struggle to translate policies into effective stakeholder engagement (Mkhize & Mutereko, 2022). Limited institutional capacity, financial constraints, and low levels of trust between councils and communities are significant barriers (Lwendo, Kadjeo, & Unengu, 2021). Although national policies promote participatory governance through mechanisms such as Joint Action Development Forums (JADFs), implementation varies considerably, with some councils achieving

stronger engagement than others (Mwaninga, 2025).

1.4 Research Gap and Study Focus

While stakeholder participation in Namibia's town councils has been documented, the specific contextual factors influencing engagement remain less understood, particularly in the northern border regions, where socioeconomic pressures intersect with cultural dynamics. The Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils in the Ohangwena Region represent valuable case studies because of their geographic proximity, similar institutional mandates, and contrasting stakeholder engagement practices. These towns are characterised by rapid urbanisation, high youth unemployment (estimated at 35–40% regionally), and uneven infrastructure provision conditions that increase the importance of participatory governance and stakeholder engagement. This study addresses this critical research gap by examining how institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural dimensions interact within Namibia's governance framework to shape stakeholder engagement in LED.

1.5 Research Questions and Objectives

1.5.1 Objectives of the study

To achieve the aims and objectives of the study on stakeholders' engagement, a solution to local economic development in the local authorities of Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils was sought by addressing the following research objectives:

- To compare stakeholders' engagement interventions that promote LED outcomes in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils.
- To identify and assess the factors affecting stakeholders' engagement in local economic development initiatives of the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils.
- To assess the impact of stakeholder engagement on the promotion of Local Economic Development (LED) initiatives in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils.
- To develop a stakeholder engagement framework for

the management and promotion of LED initiatives in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils.

1.5.2 Research questions of the study

To achieve the aim and objectives of the study on stakeholders' engagement as a remedy for local economic development in the local authorities of Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils, the following key research questions were posed:

- How do stakeholder engagement interventions in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils compare in promoting Local Economic Development (LED) outcomes?
- What factors affect stakeholder engagement in local economic development initiatives in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils?
- What is the impact of stakeholder engagement on the promotion of Local Economic Development (LED)

- initiatives in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils?
- What key components should be included in a stakeholder engagement framework to effectively manage and promote local economic development (LED) initiatives in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils?

1.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks that provide complementary lenses for understanding stakeholder engagement in local economic development (LED). Together, these frameworks suggest that stakeholder engagement in LED is sustained not only through policy but also through the interaction of governance strategies, cultural values, and socio-economic realities that align with community priorities. By situating stakeholder participation within an endogenous development framework and employing a pragmatist methodology, this study contributes

to a deeper understanding of the interwoven institutional, cultural, and economic drivers of local engagement.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Global Perspectives on Stakeholder Engagement and LED

Globally, stakeholder engagement is widely recognised as a determinant of successful Local Economic Development (Ansell & Gash, 2008; World Bank, 2020). International studies emphasise that inclusive participation enhances legitimacy, mobilises resources, and sustains development outcomes (OECD 2020). Collaborative governance frameworks highlight that institutional capacity, transparent decision-making, and socio-economic incentives, such as employment creation and infrastructure provision, are critical for effective engagement (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Where participatory structures are weak, development initiatives often fail to secure community ownership, undermining sustainability (Handley and Howell-Moroney, 2022).

Research from North America demonstrates that community-based participatory approaches that empower local populations to take an active role in decision-making lead to initiatives that reflect community needs (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2012). These approaches often include workshops, focus groups, and public forums that facilitate open dialogue, thereby strengthening their legitimacy and accountability. Capacity-building programs that educate stakeholders about LED processes have been identified as crucial for effective engagement, with training and resources helping stakeholders to understand their roles and responsibilities (Nguyen et al., 2023).

2.2 Sub-Saharan African Context: Decentralization and Participatory Governance

In Sub-Saharan Africa, LED has been promoted as a decentralisation strategy to address poverty, unemployment and inequality (Ayee, 2019). Evidence shows that weak institutions, limited fiscal autonomy, and low trust in governance frequently constrain stakeholder

participation (Mkhize and Mutereko, 2022). Conversely, traditions of civic activism and grassroots mobilisation have enabled communities to influence local development priorities, particularly in contexts where socioeconomic incentives are visible (Mensah, 2019). Therefore, participatory culture emerges as both a driver and mediator of engagement outcomes.

Across Africa, decentralisation reforms have sought to embed endogenous development principles within local governance structures (Oduro-Ofori, 2011). Case studies from Ghana, South Africa, and Kenya demonstrate that councils that integrate cultural values, community priorities, and livelihood opportunities into LED frameworks achieve stronger stakeholder buy-in (Nabudere, 2012; Pieterse, 2014). However, the uneven implementation of participatory governance remains a challenge, with some councils demonstrating robust engagement while others struggle with fragmented collaboration and resource shortages (Mkhize & Mutereko, 2022).

Sullivan et al. (2015) emphasised that citizen engagement can lead to tangible outcomes in regional governance and economic development. However, the effectiveness of such initiatives is often contingent on an enabling environment, including supportive policies and institutional frameworks. Pillay et al. (2012) discuss local government initiatives in South Africa aimed at facilitating stakeholder engagement in the economy, highlighting the importance of building partnerships among stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and government agencies, to adopt a more inclusive approach to local economic development (LED).

2.3 Namibian Context: Policy Frameworks and Implementation Realities

In Namibia, town councils are mandated to lead Local Economic Development initiatives under the constitutional framework and enabling legislation. The Local Authorities Act (Act No. 23 of 1992) and Decentralisation Enabling Act (Act No. 33 of 2000) provide a

framework for local governments to engage stakeholders in economic development initiatives (MURD, 2024). LED gained momentum following the cabinet's adoption of the White Paper on LED in 2010 and the establishment of LEDA in 2011 (MURD, 2024). Since then, all major local authorities and regional councils have engaged in LED initiatives.

However, research shows that many councils struggle to translate policies into effective stakeholder engagement (Mkhize & Mutereko, 2022). Limited institutional capacity, financial constraints, and low levels of trust between councils and communities are significant barriers (Lwendo et al., 2021). Although national policies promote participatory governance through mechanisms such as Joint Action Development Forums (JADFs), implementation varies, with some councils achieving stronger engagement than others (Mwaninga, 2025).

While stakeholder participation in Namibia's town councils has been documented, the specific contextual factors influencing engagement

remain less understood, particularly in the northern border regions, where socioeconomic pressures intersect with cultural dynamics. This research addresses this gap by conducting a comparative analysis of stakeholder engagement practices in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils, thereby contributing empirical evidence to debates on participatory governance in sub-Saharan Africa.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

This study employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design that integrated quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis within a pragmatist research paradigm (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The pragmatist stance privileges methodological fitness for purpose, emphasising that research methods should be selected based on their capacity to effectively address research questions (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). In this design, quantitative and qualitative phases were conducted in parallel with integration during interpretation. This

approach enabled the research team to obtain both statistical patterns and contextual understanding of the determinants of stakeholder engagement.

3.2 Study Context and Site Selection

The research was conducted in northern Namibia, focusing on the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils in the Oshana Region. These councils were selected based on three criteria: (1) geographic proximity, facilitating comparative analysis; (2) similar institutional mandates under the Local Authorities Act; and (3) contrasting stakeholder engagement practices, enabling the examination of variations in participatory governance approaches. Both towns are situated in border regions characterised by rapid urbanisation, high youth unemployment (estimated at 35–40% regionally), and uneven infrastructure provision conditions that increase the importance of participatory governance and stakeholder engagement.

3.3 Population and Sampling

The target population comprised council officials, community leaders, business representatives, and residents who were actively involved in local development initiatives. The study employed Stratified random Data were collected using complementary primary and secondary methods to ensure that the study's objectives were met and the findings were robust and balanced. Primary data were gathered mainly through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with 15 key

supplemented verbal data with field observations in the study areas, noting ongoing projects, infrastructure conditions and stakeholder interactions in natural settings.

Secondary data were obtained from literature and documentary reviews, including government reports, council records, and regional statistics, which provided a contextual background on socioeconomic conditions, historical trends, and policy frameworks relevant to LED in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils. These

sampling was used for the quantitative component, and purposive sampling was used for the qualitative component.

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Instruments

informants, guided by structured interviews and FGD guides that allowed probing, clarification, and detailed narratives of stakeholders' lived experiences in Local Economic Development (LED). During these sessions, the researcher used a notebook to record responses and

secondary sources were used to corroborate and expand the primary evidence, support triangulation, and enhance the validity and policy relevance of the findings. Together, interviews, focus group discussions, direct observations, and documentary analysis formed an integrated set of instruments that produced reliable, relevant, and methodologically rigorous data for examining stakeholder engagement as a remedy for LED in the region.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study aimed to organise information from multiple sources into meaningful patterns, categories, and basic descriptive units to answer the research questions and draw conclusions about stakeholder engagement in LED. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques so that textual narrative data and numerical survey data could each be analysed with methods suited to their nature. This continuous process began alongside data collection, with analysis and interpretation closely intertwined rather than being separated by a clear boundary.

3.5.1 Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative analysis involved comparing, contrasting, and classifying participants' narratives to uncover structures, processes, and barriers within stakeholder collaboration, grouping responses into emerging themes, consistencies,

Qualitative data from interviews, focus group discussions, and observation notes were analysed using Braun and Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis framework. The researcher first familiarised himself with the data through verbatim transcription and repeated reading, then applied descriptive and process coding to capture both explicit statements and underlying meanings related to stakeholder engagement in LED. Codes were refined into themes and sub-themes, such as retail and trade, housing development, agricultural production, institutional policy, regulatory frameworks, resource mobilisation, and accountability, using an inductive–deductive process supported by a live codebook and peer checking to enhance transparency and reduce interpretive bias.

and differences to enable a meaningful interpretation. This process requires theoretical sensitivity, creativity, and systematic judgement, aligning with constructivist and advocacy perspectives that emphasise multiple

meanings and context-specific realities in small-town LED settings.

3.5.2 Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative survey data were analysed within a post-positivist framework using empirical, numerical techniques to identify measurable patterns and relationships. Responses were coded, processed, and examined in SPSS to produce frequency distributions and cross-tabulations that highlighted trends, such as levels of participation in LED public meetings and variations across stakeholder groups. Excel was used to generate graphs and bar charts illustrating numerical patterns, including gender demographics and stakeholder satisfaction with infrastructure improvements in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils.

This quantitative analysis focused on detecting statistical associations and differences that could be generalised to the broader population of stakeholders, complementing the rich contextual insights of the qualitative findings. Together, the qualitative

thematic and quantitative statistical analyses produced an integrated understanding of stakeholder engagement, participation, and perceptions in LED.

3.6 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

3.6.1 Trustworthiness

This qualitative study ensured trustworthiness by aligning with the widely accepted criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Hirose and Creswell (2023) and Lincoln and Guibas (2024). Credibility was strengthened through methodological triangulation that combined stratified sampling, direct observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, alongside prolonged engagement in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils and member checking with selected participants to verify the preliminary interpretations.

Transferability was supported through a thick, detailed

description of the LED context, local authority structures, and participant characteristics, enabling readers to judge the applicability of the findings to similar small, resource-constrained towns and Global South LED settings within a pragmatist paradigm.

Dependability was ensured by maintaining a transparent audit trail that documented sampling decisions, data collection procedures, coding processes, and thematic analysis while applying interview guides and focus group protocols consistently across stakeholder groups and engaging in peer debriefing with the research supervisor. Confirmability was enhanced through reflexive note-taking on the researcher's positionality and assumptions, grounding interpretations in participants' accounts from interviews and focus groups, and using an audit trail to allow an independent observer to trace how conclusions were reached. Together, these strategies reinforce the methodological rigor and integrity of this study.

3.6.2 Ethical considerations

The study complied with the Africa Research University's ethical guidelines and Harvard-style ethical referencing standards, emphasising respect for participants' rights, privacy, dignity, and cultural sensitivities, as well as the integrity of participating institutions. Ethical clearance was obtained from the ARU's Ethical Clearance Committee, followed by formal permission from the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development, Ohangwena Regional Council, and the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils, in line with the guidance that researchers secure approval from relevant authorities before data collection. Rapport-building, transparency, and cultural sensitivity were prioritised to address potential power imbalances, concerns about confidentiality, and fears of exploitation, with informed consent procedures clearly explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and the right to withdraw.

All participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their anonymity and confidentiality would be protected throughout and after the study period. Data protection measures included shredding paper records and securely reformatting electronic data after five years, in accordance with the ARU's best practices, thereby safeguarding participants while maintaining scientific integrity.

4. Results

4.1 Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=62)

The quantitative sample comprised 62 respondents representing diverse stakeholder categories in the study. The gender distribution showed 58.1% female and 41.9% male participants, reflecting broader national trends in Namibia, where women constitute 51.8% of the population and increasingly play active roles in governance and development processes (Ministry of Gender Equality, Poverty Eradication and Social Welfare, 2023). The age distribution revealed that 42.9% of

respondents were aged 31–40 years (middle-aged adults actively involved in economic activities), while 28.6% each were aged 41–50 and 51–60 years, indicating a strong representation of experienced individuals with long-standing involvement in local development matters.

Occupational diversity was pronounced, with LED Managers/Chief Development Planners representing 23% of respondents, Business Owners 16%, Open Market Facilitators 15%, Councillors 13%, and CEOs, Traditional Leaders, Deputy Directors, and Bankers each 6%. This occupational diversity ensured that the study captured perspectives from the government, private sector, and grassroots players. Regarding town representation, 73.3% of the respondents were from Eenhana, while 10% were from Helao Nafidi, with smaller proportions from Windhoek, Rundu, Otavi, Omuthiya, and Ondangwa (2–3% each). Respondents' institutional affiliations included Local Authorities (22.6%), Regional Governance Structures

(16.1%), Regional Council and SME sectors (14.5%), the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development (6.5%), and smaller proportions from financial

institutions, business associations, large enterprises, and educational institutions.

4.2 Quantitative Findings

4.2.1 Economic Sector Priorities in LED Initiatives

Respondents were asked to identify and prioritise the economic sectors

driving Local Economic Development in their respective towns. The results are presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Economic Sector	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Retail and Trade	39	63.6
Housing Development	35	57.6
Agriculture	17	27.3
Manufacturing	6	9.1
Transportation	4	6.5
Tourism	4	6.5
Mining	1	1.6
Education	1	1.6
Finance	1	1.6

Retail and trade accounted for 63.6% of the responses, emerging as the most frequently identified economic drivers. Stakeholders view this sector as the backbone of the local economy because of its role in job creation, market access, and the circulation of goods and income. Housing development followed closely at

57.6%, indicating that stakeholders perceive infrastructure and residential development as vital for attracting investment, providing employment opportunities, and improving living standards. Agriculture was rated at 27.3%, suggesting that many respondents view farming and agribusiness as central to sustaining

livelihoods and ensuring food security, especially in peri-urban areas. Manufacturing (9.1%) was considered an emerging priority, and tourism (6.5% each) were mentioned less frequently, suggesting that these sectors may be underdeveloped or not yet perceived as primary engines for local economic

reflecting the awareness of its potential to add value and drive industrial growth. Transportation growth. Mining, education, and finance (1.6% each) recorded minimal responses, indicating either low priority or unrealised potential.

Figure 1: Economic Sector Priorities in LED Initiatives (n=62)

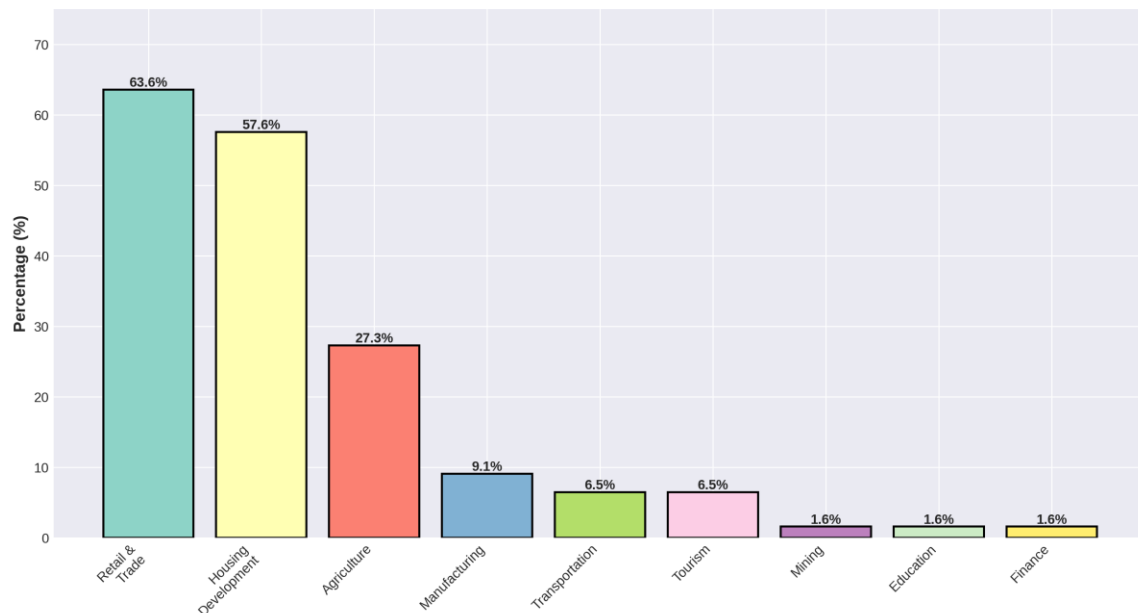


Figure 1: Economic Sector Priorities in LED Initiatives

4.2.2 Determinants and Barriers to Stakeholder Engagement

Respondents were asked to identify the factors affecting stakeholder engagement in LED initiatives. The

results are presented in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Determinant/Barrier	Frequency	Percentage (%)
High unemployment and lack of funding	41	66.6

Insufficient technical/skills training	17	27.3
Lack of stakeholder coordination	17	27.3
Limited stakeholder engagement	10	16.1
Inadequate infrastructure	9	14.5
Electricity and road challenges	9	14.5
Regulatory or policy challenges	8	12.9
Lack of political leadership	1	1.6

The most significant challenges were high unemployment rates and a lack of funding for LED initiatives (66.6%), identified as the top-ranked barriers. These findings indicate that economic hardships and limited financial resources are central obstacles, directly affecting both stakeholders' willingness and capacity to engage in LED processes. Unemployment also signals a lack of visible outcomes from existing LED efforts, discouraging further involvement.

Insufficient technical or skills training opportunities and lack of coordination

among stakeholders were reported by 27.3% of respondents each. These responses suggest that stakeholders recognise the need for capacity building and stronger collaboration mechanisms to ensure meaningful participation and long-term impact. Lack of coordination may lead to duplicated efforts, missed synergies, and poor implementation of development strategies. Limited stakeholder engagement was reported at 16.1%, confirming that many stakeholders feel excluded or underutilised in decision-making

processes, weakening community buy-in and the sustainability of development interventions.

Inadequate infrastructure and electricity/road challenges were reported by 14.5% of respondents, reflecting practical barriers to LED. Poor basic services reduce the attractiveness of towns for investment and limit the activities of stakeholders. Regulatory or policy challenges were

reported by 12.9% of respondents, suggesting that unclear or restrictive policies undermine engagement and local development efforts. Lack of political leadership was reported by only 1.6%, indicating occasional concern about weak political will in driving LED.

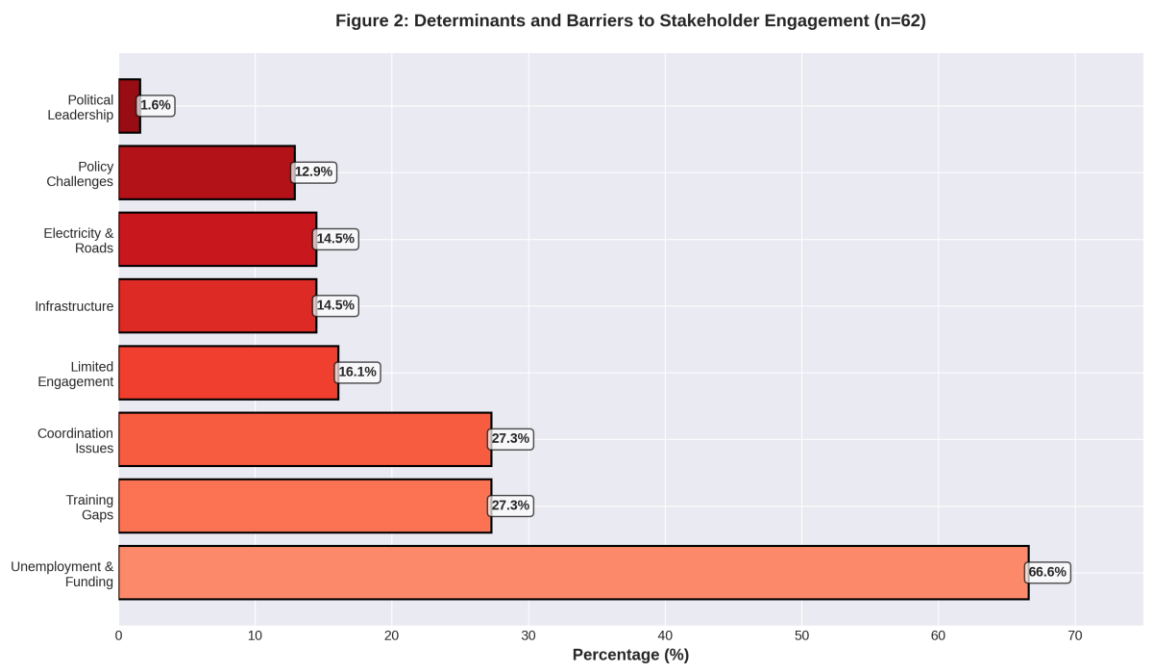


Figure 2: Determinants and Barriers to Stakeholder Engagement

4.2.3 Preferred Strategies to Address Engagement Challenges

Respondents were asked to identify their preferred strategies for addressing stakeholder engagement challenges. The results are presented in Table 3 and Figure 3.

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage (%)
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Increase funding opportunities	42	67.7
Build stronger private sector partnerships	29	46.6
Expand technical/skills training programs	24	38.7
Improve communication and transparency	20	32.3
Enhance infrastructure development	20	32.3
Drive industrialisation	1	1.6

The findings revealed that 67.7% of respondents cited increasing funding opportunities for LED initiatives as their top priority. A significant number of respondents rated building stronger partnerships with the private sector at 46.6%. Expanding technical or skills training programs was rated

as 38.7%. Improving communication and transparency and enhancing infrastructure development accounted for 32.3% of the respondents. A small percentage (1.6%) of respondents reported the need for a strategy to drive industrialisation.

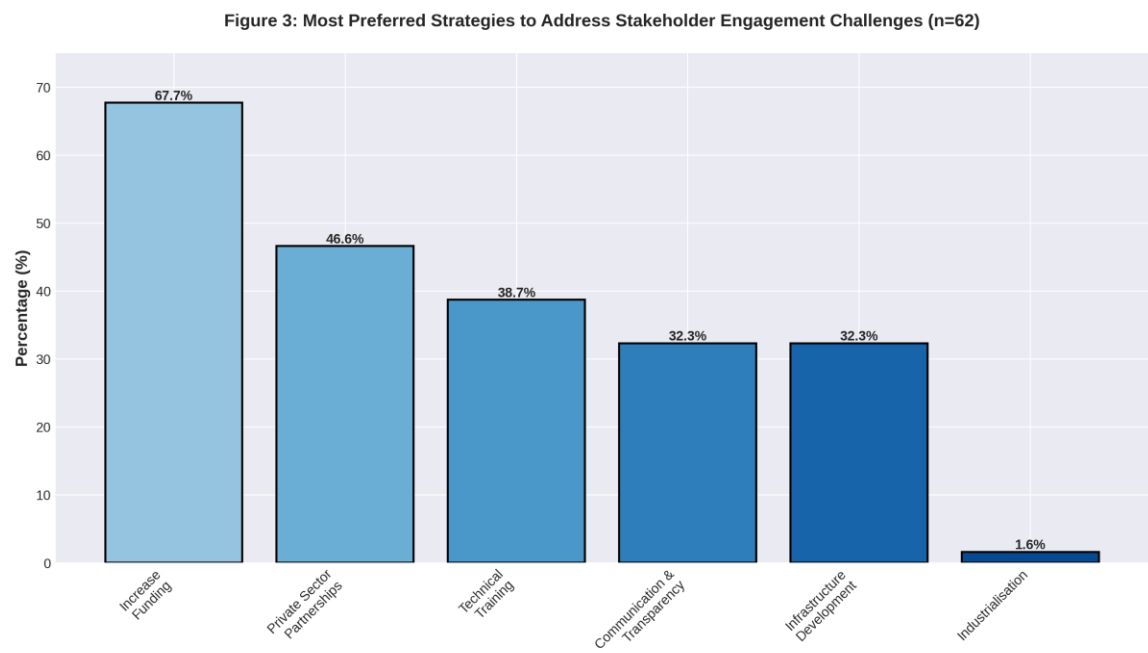


Figure 3: Most Preferred Strategies to Address Stakeholder Engagement Challenges

4.2.4 Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement in LED

Respondents rated the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in LED initiatives on a five-point scale. The results are presented in Table 4 and Figure 4.

Effectiveness Rating	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Very Effective	7	12.1
Somewhat Effective	28	45.2
Neutral	18	30.0
Not Very Effective	10	16.1

The findings revealed that 45.2% of the respondents believed that stakeholder engagement was somewhat effective. Nearly a third of respondents were neutral (30.0%), indicating uncertainty or lack of strong opinion about stakeholder effectiveness. A smaller proportion of participants believed that engagement was not very effective

(16.1%). Only 12.1% of the respondents viewed stakeholder engagement as very effective. These results suggest that while stakeholders recognise the value of

engagement, they perceive significant room for improvement in terms of implementation and outcomes.

Figure 4: Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement in LED (n=62)

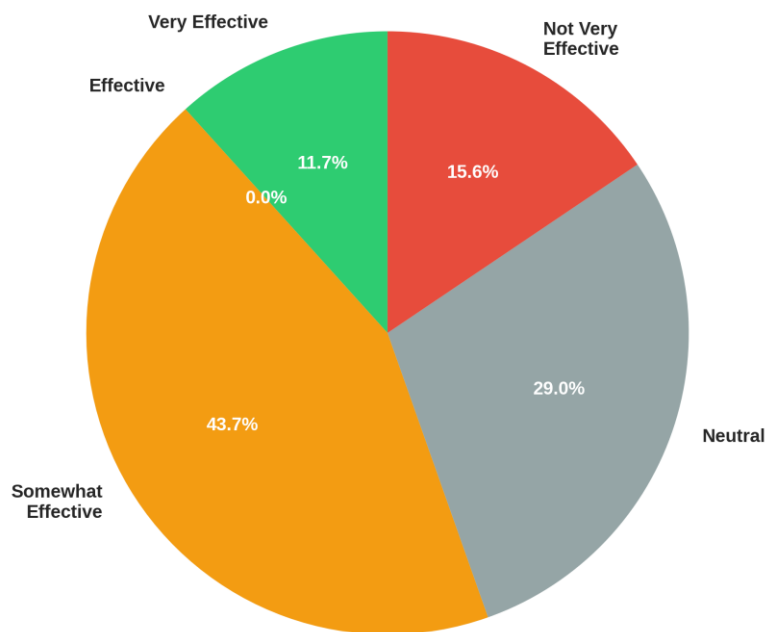


Figure 4: Effectiveness of Stakeholder Engagement in LED

4.2.5 Town-Specific Comparative Findings: Economic Drivers

A comparative analysis between Eenhana and Helao Nafidi revealed notable differences in stakeholder

engagement practices and economic priorities. The results are presented in Table 5 and Figure 5.

Economic Driver	Eenhana (%)	Helao Nafidi (%)
Housing Development	35	20
Retail and Trade	30	10
Agriculture	25	50

Transport	5	10
Tourism	5	10

Eenhana emphasized housing development (35%) and retail and trade (30%), showing a more urban-commercial economic orientation. In contrast, Helao Nafidi relied heavily on agriculture (50%), indicating a rural economic structure or community focused on farming. This divergence suggests that stakeholder

engagement in LED is shaped by the dominant economic activities in each town. In Eenhana, efforts might focus on urban infrastructure and market development, whereas in Helao Nafidi, initiatives may prioritise agricultural support and rural development programs.

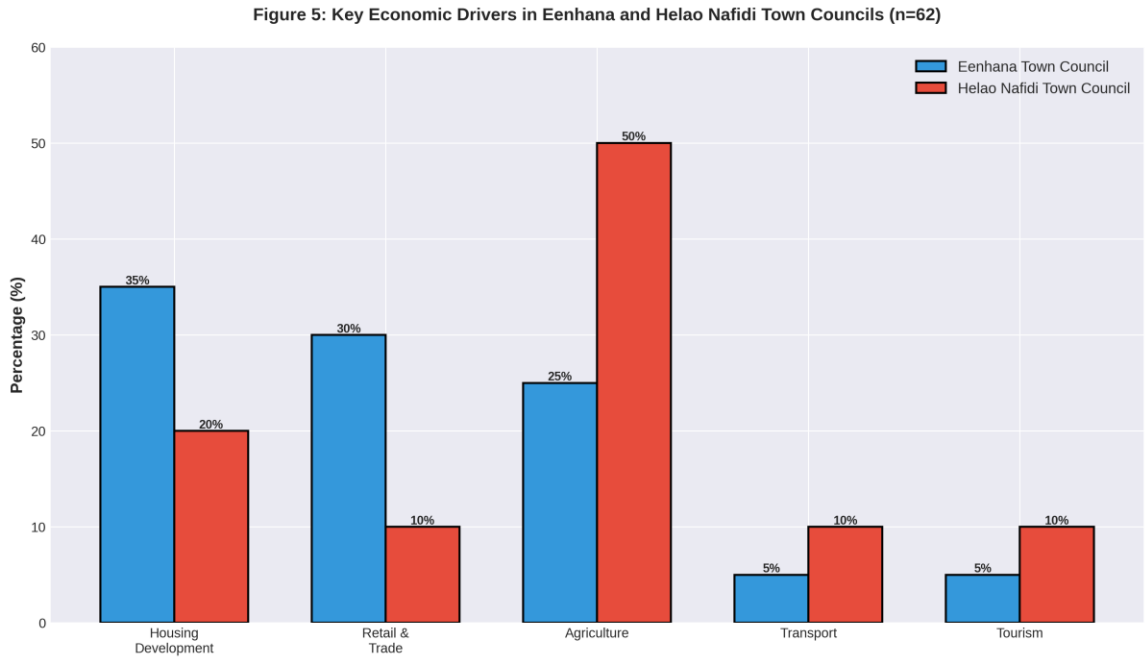


Figure 5: Key Economic Drivers in Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils

4.2.6 Town-Specific Comparative Findings: Priority Strategies

A comparative analysis of the priority strategies for LED revealed both

similarities and differences between the two councils. The results are presented in Table 6 and Figure 6.

Priority Strategy	Eenhana (%)	Helao Nafidi (%)
Infrastructure Development	90	85
Technical Training	80	75
Public-Private Partnerships	70	80
Transparency	70	65

Both towns prioritised infrastructure development, though with different ratings: Eenhana had the highest priority at 90%, whereas Helao Nafidi had 85%. Technical training was the second most prioritised by both towns, with Eenhana at 80%, whereas Helao Nafidi had a slightly

lower 75%. In contrast, Eenhana moderately prioritised Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) at 70%, while for Helao Nafidi, this was 80%. Eenhana rated transparency moderately at 70%, whereas Helao Nafidi rated it lower at 65%.

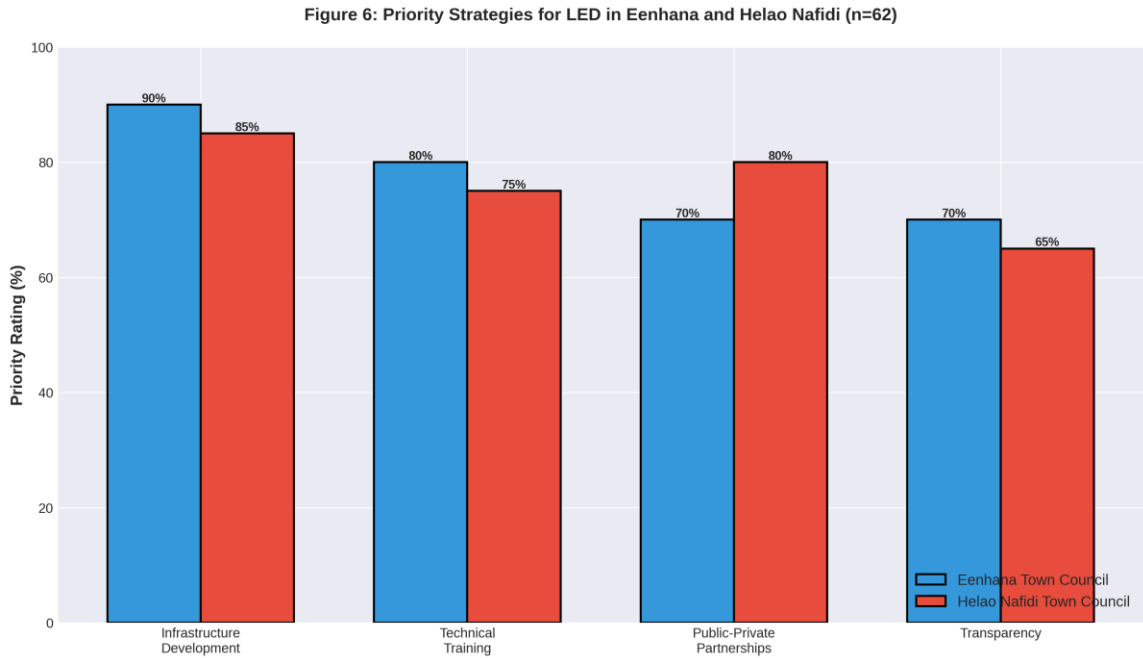


Figure 6: Priority Strategies for LED in Eenhana and Helao Nafidi

4.3 Qualitative Findings

4.3.1 Theme 1: Institutional Capacity and Coordination

Institutional capacity, encompassing technical skills, financial resources, and coordination mechanisms, emerged as a foundational determinant of stakeholder engagement. One council official noted:

"Our challenge is not a lack of will but a lack of capacity. We have the vision, but we lack the technical expertise and resources to implement LED initiatives effectively. When we cannot deliver on promises, stakeholders lose confidence" (ETC-CO1, 2025).

Participants emphasised that weak coordination among government agencies, the private sector, and civil society led to duplicated efforts and missed synergies. A traditional leader in Helao Nafidi observed:

"We have many organisations working on development, but they do not talk to each other. This creates confusion and wastes resources. What we need is a coordinating mechanism that brings everyone together around shared priorities" (HNTC-TL2, 2025).

4.3.2 Theme 2: Trust and Transparency

Trust is a critical mediator of stakeholder engagement. Participants consistently emphasised that transparent communication and accountability enhanced trust, whereas opacity and unilateral decision-making eroded it. A business representative stated:

"Trust is built through transparency. When councils share information about budgets, project timelines, and decision-making processes,

stakeholders feel valued and are more willing to participate. When decisions are made behind closed doors, people disengage" (ETC-BO3, 2025).

The participants highlighted the importance of regular feedback mechanisms and participatory monitoring. One community leader emphasised the following:

"Participation should not be symbolic; it must be structured and continuous. We must assess whether the engagements are effective. Regular evaluations would help us identify gaps, adjust where necessary, and maintain alignment with the overall strategic development goals of our towns. Without evaluation, we cannot measure progress or

learn from mistakes" (HNTC-CR4, 2025).

4.3.3 Theme 3: Socio-Economic Incentives

Stakeholders were significantly more inclined to participate when initiatives promised tangible socioeconomic benefits. Unemployment and lack of visible economic returns are major disincentives. A youth representative noted:

"People are tired of meetings that do not lead to jobs. When we see that participation in LED initiatives actually creates employment or improves infrastructure, more people will engage in them. Right now, many see it as a waste of time" (ETC-YR5, 2025).

Participants emphasised that employment creation, improved infrastructure, and livelihood support are essential for sustaining engagement. An SME owner stated:

"Without secure funding and visible economic

benefits, LED initiatives often stall in the early stages. Projects are short-lived or donor dependent. What we need is sustainable funding models, such as community microfinance or local revenue-backed grants that ensure long-term viability" (HNTC-SME6, 2025).

4.3.4 Theme 4: Participatory Culture and Historical Dynamics

Historical experiences of civic activism and community mobilisation shape the willingness to engage. In Helao Nafidi, a stronger tradition of grassroots participation was evident, with participants noting:

"Our community has always organised itself. We have a culture of coming together to solve problems in our

organisation. This history makes it easier for people to participate in LED initiatives when they see genuine opportunities for influence" (HNTC-CR7, 2025).

In contrast, Eenhana participants noted that the historical experiences of top-down governance had created scepticism about participatory processes. One community member observed:

"For many years, decisions were made for us, not with us. Building a culture where people believe their voices matter takes time. We need consistent demonstration that participation leads to real change" (ETC-CR8, 2025).

4.4 Mixed-Methods Integration

The convergence of the quantitative and qualitative findings revealed a

coherent explanatory framework for the determinants of stakeholder

engagement. Quantitative data identified unemployment and funding constraints (66.6%) as the primary barriers, while qualitative narratives deepened these insights by illustrating how these challenges translate into the lived experiences of frustration, dependency, and disengagement. Together, the evidence underscores that stakeholder participation is contingent upon both internal capacities, such as confidence, skills, and motivation, and external conditions, including institutional quality, financial resources, and collaborative structures.

5. Discussion

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that stakeholder engagement in Local Economic Development is not simply a matter of policy directives but is shaped by a convergence of socioeconomic realities, institutional arrangements, and cultural expectations. This interpretation aligns with the endogenous development theory, which emphasises that sustainable

The quantitative finding that Helao Nafidi stakeholders rated engagement effectiveness higher (mean = 3.6/5) than Eenhana stakeholders (mean = 3.1/5) was explained qualitatively by stronger institutional coordination, more inclusive participatory mechanisms, and greater responsiveness to community priorities in Helao Nafidi. Conversely, Eenhana's lower effectiveness ratings reflected constrained resources and less structured engagement mechanisms despite strong community commitment.

development must be rooted in local realities, values, and resources rather than imposed externally (Oduro-Ofori, 2011).

The identification of unemployment and funding constraints as the primary barriers (66.6%) reflects broader structural challenges in Namibia's economy, where unemployment remains above 33% (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2023). This finding resonates with the literature, indicating that poor job opportunities undermine civic trust

and weaken collaboration in LED (Yeboah & Flynn, 2021). As one qualitative participant noted, "unemployment is killing motivation" a sentiment that captures how economic hardship directly undermines stakeholder willingness to invest time and energy in participatory processes.

The secondary barriers, insufficient technical training (27.3%) and lack of coordination (27.3%), point to institutional capacity deficits that compound the effects of economic constraints. These findings align with research from South Africa and Ghana, which identified insufficient technical training and skills mismatches as widespread barriers to LED (Mkhize & Mutereko, 2022; Vitálišová et al., 2021). The lack of coordination reflects what Ansell and Gash (2008) describe as institutional design failures that prevent effective collaboration among diverse stakeholders.

5.2 Theoretical Integration

The study's findings reinforce the relevance of both pragmatism and the endogenous development theory.

From a pragmatist perspective, this research demonstrates that effective stakeholder engagement requires practical mechanisms that produce tangible outcomes (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The emphasis on employment creation, infrastructure improvement, and livelihood support reflects pragmatism's focus on "what works" in practice. Stakeholders are more willing to participate when they perceive concrete benefits, suggesting that engagement strategies must be grounded in practical problem solving rather than abstract participation ideals.

Endogenous development theory is validated by the finding that stakeholders prioritise locally identified sectors (retail/trade 63.6%, housing 57.6%, agriculture 27.3%) and emphasise the importance of cultural responsiveness and traditional authority integration (Oduro-Ofori 2011). The qualitative finding that Helao Nafidi's stronger tradition of grassroots participation facilitated more effective engagement demonstrates how local institutional cultures and historical experiences

shape the patterns of participation. This aligns with Oduro-Ofori's (2011) argument that endogenous development principles must be embedded within local governance structures to foster authentic stakeholder ownership.

5.3 Comparative Insights: Eenhana vs. Helao Nafidi

The comparative analysis revealed distinct engagement models with different strengths and challenges. Eenhana's community-driven approach emphasizes grassroots mobilization and cultural integration but is constrained by limited institutional resources and inconsistent coordination. Helao Nafidi's institutionally coordinated approach produces more structured initiatives and attracts external resources but faces challenges in maintaining inclusive participation and balancing political influence with democratic representation (Mwaninga 2025).

These differences suggest that effective LED requires tailored approaches that leverage local strengths while addressing context-

specific constraints in each country. Eenhana would benefit from capacity-building and resource mobilization strategies that strengthen institutional coordination while preserving community-driven momentum. Helao Nafidi would benefit from mechanisms that ensure inclusive participation and prevent elite capture, such as participatory budgeting and citizen scorecards (Robinson and Taylor, 2022).

5.4 Implications for Practice

The study's findings have several practical implications for policymakers, council officials, and development practitioners.

6. Pragmatist Stakeholder Engagement Framework for LED

Based on the study's findings and theoretical grounding, this study proposes an integrated pragmatist stakeholder engagement framework comprising eight interconnected pillars. This framework operationalises pragmatism by embedding trust, accountability, inclusivity, and adaptability into LED practice, providing councils with a

structured yet flexible roadmap for unlocking LED's potential.

6.1 Framework Pillars

Councils should organise regular training programs for council staff, community leaders, and local entrepreneurs, focusing on practical competencies, such as financial literacy, project management, and participatory planning. These sessions should be complemented by the establishment of open communication platforms, such as quarterly stakeholder forums, accessible information bulletins, and digital portals that allow citizens to track progress and voice concerns. By embedding these mechanisms into routine governance, councils demonstrate reliability and competence, transforming trust into a lived reality grounded in accountability and mutual confidence.

This pillar emphasises transparency and credibility in the management of resources. Councils should implement participatory budgeting processes that allow stakeholders to influence resource-allocation decisions. Public reporting

mechanisms should clearly link budget allocations to LED priorities and outcomes, demonstrating accountability and building citizens' confidence in local governance processes.

This pillar clarifies mandates and avoids duplication by mapping institutional responsibilities and establishing co-ordination committees. Councils create a leaner, more responsive governance system in which stakeholders collaborate rather than compete, thereby enhancing efficiency and reducing the wasteful duplication of efforts.

This pillar embodies inclusivity and respect for local values. Councils must integrate traditional authorities, local languages and cultural practices into LED planning and implementation. This ensures that strategies resonate with community norms and are co-created rather than imposed, thereby enhancing the legitimacy and sustainability of development initiatives.

This pillar provides mechanisms for continuous involvement and feedback. Councils should establish

LED forums, citizen scorecards, and participatory monitoring committees to create iterative feedback loops in which policies are tested, refined, and adapted to the lived realities. Regular evaluation of engagement mechanisms and LED outcomes should enable timely adjustments to strategies and foster a culture of learning and adaptation in the workplace.

This pillar mobilises both external and internal resources for LED priority. Councils should prepare evidence-based LED profiles that highlight unemployment trends, SME growth potential, and infrastructure gaps, thereby attracting donor funding, government grants, and private investments aligned with local needs. This strategic approach ensures that resources are directed toward the priorities identified through participatory processes.

This pillar ensures that marginalised groups are heard and included. Councils must create platforms for youth, women, and informal traders to articulate their needs and contribute to the LED processes. This may include dedicated youth councils,

women's business associations, and informal trader forums that ensure diverse voices are heard and valued, thereby broadening the ownership of LED initiatives.

This pillar culminates in lessons learned and future strategies. Councils should document experiences from pilot projects and stakeholder engagement, feeding these insights into strategic LED plans and regional knowledge-sharing platforms. This cultivates a culture of reflection and adaptation, strengthening institutional resilience and enabling the continuous improvement of LED strategies.

6.2 Framework Implementation

The framework is designed to be implemented iteratively, with councils beginning with foundational pillars (trust building and institutional coordination) and progressively strengthening advanced pillars (targeted support and adaptive learning). Implementation should be tailored to local contexts, with Eenhana emphasising capacity building and resource mobilisation, and Helao Nafidi emphasising

inclusive participation and power redistribution mechanisms.

7. Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the geographic scope is limited to two town councils in the Ohangwena Region, limiting generalizability to other Namibian contexts or sub-Saharan Africa more broadly. While the towns were selected for their contrasting engagement practices, findings may not transfer to councils in different regions with distinct economic structures or governance histories.

8. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that stakeholder engagement in Local Economic Development is not simply a matter of policy compliance but is shaped by a convergence of socioeconomic realities, institutional arrangements, and cultural expectations. The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that unemployment and funding constraints emerged as the primary barriers to engagement, while institutional capacity, trust and transparency, socio-economic

incentives, and participatory culture functioned as key determinants of effective participation (Mwaninga, 2025).

A comparative analysis of the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils reveals distinct engagement models, with Helao Nafidi demonstrating stronger institutional coordination and more inclusive participatory mechanisms, while Eenhana emphasises community-driven initiatives constrained by limited resources. Both councils recognise stakeholder engagement as vital for LED but face systemic challenges that require structured frameworks and tailored strategies (Oduro-Ofori, 2011).

The proposed pragmatist stakeholder engagement framework, grounded in endogenous development theory, provides councils with an actionable roadmap for strengthening stakeholder involvement in LED. By operationalising trust-building, accountability, institutional coordination, cultural responsiveness, participatory structures, targeted support mobilisation, inclusive voice-building,

and adaptive learning, councils can move beyond policy prescriptions to embrace locally grounded and evidence-based governance strategies (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Ultimately, this research contributes to debates on participatory governance in sub-Saharan Africa by demonstrating that effective LED requires moving beyond abstract participation ideals to practical mechanisms that produce tangible benefits, embed local values and knowledge, and create genuine opportunities for influencing stakeholders. By situating stakeholder participation within an endogenous development framework, this study enriches the scholarship on local economic development and provides policymakers and practitioners with evidence-based insights for designing context-responsive LED initiatives that strengthen community resilience and promote sustainable, equitable economic growth (Tsurumi, 1929; Oduro-Ofori, 2011).

9. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

The following recommendations are offered for policymakers, local government officials, and development practitioners seeking to enhance stakeholder engagement in Local Economic Development initiatives:

Councils should establish formal, regularly scheduled LED forums that meet at least quarterly and include balanced representation from municipal staff, businesses, civil society organisations, traditional authorities, and community members. These forums should have clearly defined terms of reference, transparent decision-making procedures, and explicit accountability mechanisms to ensure that stakeholder input genuinely influences the planning and implementation of LED. Forums should be supported by dedicated staff and budgets to ensure their sustainability and effectiveness.

Councils should invest in comprehensive capacity-building initiatives that target both council staff and community stakeholders.

Training should focus on practical competencies, including financial literacy, project management, participatory planning methodologies, monitoring and evaluation techniques, and conflict resolution. Training should be delivered in local languages and adapted to local contexts to maximise accessibility and its relevance. Councils should establish ongoing mentorship programs that pair experienced development professionals with emerging leaders to facilitate knowledge transfer and institutional learning.

Councils should adopt participatory budgeting processes that allow stakeholders to influence resource-allocation decisions for LED initiatives. Public reporting mechanisms should clearly link budget allocations to LED priorities and to documented outcomes. Councils should publish regular financial statements and progress reports accessible to all stakeholders to demonstrate accountability and build citizen confidence in local governance. Digital platforms should be established to enable the real-time

tracking of project implementation and resource utilisation.

Councils should establish open communication platforms, including quarterly stakeholder forums, accessible information bulletins, community radio programs, and digital portals that allow citizens to track progress and voice concerns. Regular feedback mechanisms and participatory monitoring should create iterative feedback loops in which policies are tested, refined and adapted to community realities. Councils should establish ombudsman offices and community feedback mechanisms to address stakeholder concerns and demonstrate responsiveness to community input.

Councils should ensure that LED initiatives directly address stakeholder priorities regarding employment creation, infrastructure improvement, and livelihood support. Engagement strategies should be explicitly linked to tangible economic benefits, ensuring that participation translates into visible improvements in the community's well-being. Councils should prioritise job creation

initiatives, particularly those targeting youth and women, and establish mechanisms to track employment outcomes from LED initiatives.

Councils should integrate traditional authorities, local languages and cultural practices into LED planning and implementation. Development initiatives should be co-created with communities rather than being imposed externally, ensuring that strategies resonate with community norms and values. Councils should establish formal roles for traditional leaders in LED governance structures and ensure that planning processes respect cultural protocols and decision-making traditions.

Councils should create targeted platforms for marginalised groups, including youth, women, and informal traders, to articulate their needs and contribute to LED processes. This may include dedicated youth councils, women's business associations, and informal trader forums that ensure that diverse voices are heard and valued. Councils should implement gender-sensitive engagement practices and establish childcare and transportation

support to reduce barriers to participation for women and other marginalised groups.

Councils should establish participatory monitoring committees and citizen scorecards that allow stakeholders to assess the progress and suggest improvements. Regular evaluation of engagement mechanisms and LED outcomes should enable timely adjustments to strategies and foster a culture of learning and adaptation in the workplace. Councils should establish baseline indicators for LED outcomes and conduct regular evaluations to assess progress toward objectives. Results should be shared transparently with stakeholders and used to inform strategy adjustments.

10. Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations are offered for researchers seeking to advance knowledge of stakeholder engagement and Local Economic Development:

Future research should broaden its geographic scope to encompass additional towns and regions in

Namibia, enabling comparative analyses that highlight variations in stakeholder engagement practices and uncover context-specific challenges and opportunities for the same. Longitudinal studies tracking engagement practices over time would provide insights into how engagement mechanisms evolve and how stakeholder participation influences LED outcomes over extended periods. Such research would enable the assessment of the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of engagement strategies.

Subsequent studies should explore stakeholders' perceptions and attitudes regarding the efficiency and effectiveness of the LED strategies adopted by local authorities. This would help identify the gaps between policy objectives and stakeholder expectations, thereby informing more responsive governance approaches. Future research should examine how stakeholder perceptions of effectiveness influence their willingness to continue participating in LED processes and how feedback

mechanisms can be improved to enhance responsiveness.

Future research should investigate how gender and age dynamics shape stakeholder engagement in LED. This includes examining barriers to participation faced by women and youth, identifying strategies for enhancing their involvement, and assessing how gender-inclusive engagement influences LED outcomes. Future research should explore how intersectionality (the intersection of gender, age, class, and other identities) shapes participation patterns and outcomes.

Longitudinal research should evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the proposed pragmatist stakeholder-engagement framework. This involves tracking framework adoption, assessing changes in stakeholder engagement practices, and measuring the impact on LED outcomes, including employment creation, infrastructure development, and community empowerment. Future research should identify implementation barriers and success factors and

develop guidance for councils seeking to adopt the framework.

Comparative research examining stakeholder engagement in LED across multiple sub-Saharan African countries would provide insights into how contextual factors (governance structures, economic conditions, and cultural norms) shape engagement practices and outcomes. Such research would enrich regional scholarship on participatory development and enable the identification of best practices and

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Future research should examine power dynamics within stakeholder engagement processes, including how elite capture, political patronage, and other forms of power imbalances influence participation and outcomes. Future research should explore strategies for preventing elite capture and ensuring that marginalised voices are genuinely heard and valued in decision-making processes.

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