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From Voice to Value: Stakeholder Engagement, Local Economic Development Impact, and a Pragmatist Framework for Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils.

Research Article

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Abstract

Introduction: Local Economic Development (LED) is increasingly understood as a place-based process through which public authorities, businesses, communities, civil society organisations, and development partners mobilise local capabilities to improve livelihoods and economic resilience. However, the presence of participation does not automatically produce a development impact. The quality, inclusiveness, institutionalisation, and responsiveness of stakeholder engagement determine whether local knowledge is translated into investment, infrastructure, employment, enterprise development, and public value. This study assesses the impact of stakeholder engagement on the promotion of LED initiatives and develops a stakeholder engagement framework for the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils in Namibia. This article is based exclusively on Objectives 3 and 4 of a doctoral mixed-methods study (Mwaninga, 2026).

Methodology: convergent parallel design combined a stratified survey of 62 respondents with purposively selected qualitative evidence from 16 key informants, including municipal, regional,

business, financial, civil society, and community stakeholders. A descriptive comparative analysis was integrated with thematic interpretation and direct observation.

Results: The findings show that stakeholder engagement has a positive but uneven impact. Inclusive engagement was associated with a stronger alignment between LED initiatives and local priorities, broader support, improved infrastructure prioritisation, and more credible prospects for enterprise and livelihood improvement. However, fragmented participation, weak feedback, limited resources, unclear responsibilities, and uneven inclusion constrain the translation of engagement into sustained outcomes. Eenhana displayed a more urban-commercial orientation centred on housing and trade, whereas Helao Nafidi showed stronger agricultural and cross-border economic orientations and more visible incorporation of informal traders and youth voices. This article proposes the "Unlocking LED Potential: Pragmatist Stakeholder Engagement Framework", comprising eight mutually reinforcing pillars: trust and training, resource alignment and accountability, institutional roles and coordination, cultural responsiveness, participatory structures and monitoring and evaluation, targeted support, barrier reduction and voice-building, and future-oriented learning.

Conclusion: Stakeholder engagement should be treated as an institutional capability and an adaptive economic development system rather than as a single consultation event.

Keywords: stakeholder engagement; local economic development; participatory governance; collaborative governance; municipal development; Namibia; Eenhana; Helao Nafidi; framework.

1. Introduction

1.1 Global context and problem orientation

Globally, local economic development has moved from a narrow concern with attracting external investors to a broader approach that combines local enterprise development, human capabilities, infrastructure, social inclusion, institutional coordination, and place-based innovation. This evolution reflects the recognition that economic growth is not produced only by national policies or private investments. It is also shaped by the quality of relationships among local authorities, firms, community organisations, workers, households, educational institutions, civil society and higher levels of government. Rodríguez-Pose and Tijmstra (2005) describe LED as a territorially grounded and locally managed approach that seeks to mobilise local resources, improve employment, and support economic

growth. The central implication is that development is more likely to endure when it is connected to the knowledge, capacities, and priorities of the place where it is implemented.

Therefore, stakeholder engagement is not merely an ethical addition to LED. It is a governance mechanism through which local development priorities are identified, resources are negotiated, decisions are legitimised, implementation responsibilities are allocated, and results are reviewed. Participation can provide local authorities with information that is not available in administrative records, whereas communities and businesses can gain a clearer understanding of constraints, opportunities, and institutional responsibilities. The World Bank Group (2015) notes that participatory and community-driven approaches can strengthen the inclusiveness and sustainability of urban development, but also cautions that participation in urban settings is affected by institutional fragmentation, power differences, resource limitations, and the challenge of reaching excluded groups. Consequently, the practical question is not whether stakeholders should be engaged but how engagement can generate observable local economic value.

The global literature also warns against treating all forms of participation as equivalent. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development places partnerships and inclusive institutions at the centre of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Arnstein's (1969) classic ladder distinguishes between symbolic forms of participation and forms that redistribute influence. Fung (2006) similarly shows that participation varies according to who participates, how participants communicate, and how much authority their contributions have. In collaborative governance, engagement becomes consequential when stakeholders participate in forums that are inclusive, informed, deliberative, and linked to decision-making. Ansell and Gash (2008) emphasise that collaborative governance depends on institutional design, facilitative leadership, trust building, dialogue, and the gradual development of a shared understanding. Emerson et al. (2012) extend this argument by presenting collaboration as a dynamic system in which principled engagement, shared motivation, and joint capacity generate collaborative actions and outcomes.

1.2 African context: decentralisation, local agency, and uneven development impact

This challenge is particularly significant in Africa, where decentralisation has expanded the formal responsibilities of local governments, while financial, technical, and administrative capabilities often remain uneven. The African Union (2014) links decentralisation and local development to the transfer of responsibilities, capacities, and resources to sub-national levels in ways that foster participation, improve service delivery, and mobilise local knowledge and capabilities. This principle is closely aligned with LED, which seeks to generate economic activity by connecting local institutions, assets, skills and markets. However, decentralisation does not automatically create effective local development. It must be accompanied by coordination, predictable resources, institutional clarity, and mechanisms through which citizens and economic actors can influence the decisions.

African LED practice demonstrates the importance of local ownership but also reveals recurring implementation constraints that hinder progress. Rodríguez-Pose and Tijmstra (2005) argue that LED can complement top-down development approaches in sub-Saharan Africa by drawing on local resources and stakeholder partnerships. Simultaneously, they note that local development operates within structural constraints, such as weak infrastructure, limited finance, uneven skills, small markets, and institutional fragility. These constraints shape the impact of the engagement. A community may identify a viable enterprise opportunity, but the opportunity may not progress if land, roads, electricity, market access, finance, or technical support are unavailable to them.

The African context also makes the distribution of voices important. Public authorities, established businesses, traditional leaders, informal traders, women, youth, civil society organisations, and marginalised households may hold different levels of power and access to resources. Bingham et al. (2005) argue that new governance arrangements depend on public agencies learning to work across organisational boundaries and with non-state actors. Bovaird (2007) adds that co-production becomes meaningful when users and communities are involved in shaping, delivering, and evaluating public services, rather than merely reacting

to decisions already made. For African municipalities, this suggests that engagement should include the design and implementation of LED initiatives, not just consultation during planning.

Monitoring and evaluation are other regional concerns. When stakeholders do not see how their contributions affect budgets, projects, or services, trust can weaken, and participation may become episodic. Results-based monitoring and evaluation can help connect participation to observable results by clarifying indicators, responsibilities, reporting cycles, and corrective actions (World Bank, 2004). The OECD (2023) similarly recommends combining self-assessment with outcome indicators, stakeholder group ratings, transparent dialogue, and public reporting. These approaches are relevant to African local authorities because they offer a practical way to assess both the quality of the engagement process and the development outcomes associated with it.

1.3 Namibian context and study setting

Namibia provides an important setting for examining the connection between stakeholder engagement and LED. Since independence, the country has pursued decentralisation, local government, regional planning, and economic diversification while continuing to confront unemployment, spatial inequality, skills gaps, infrastructure deficits, and dependence on a limited number of economic sectors. In this setting, small and intermediate towns are expected to provide services, facilitate enterprises, manage land and infrastructure, and contribute to local economic opportunities. However, town councils cannot achieve these functions alone. Their development outcomes depend on relationships with regional councils, national ministries, businesses, financial institutions, civil society, traditional authorities, communities and development partners.

Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils are suitable comparative cases because they are located in the same broad region and operate within related public-sector mandates while exhibiting different economic orientations and engagement experiences. Eenhana is presented in the thesis as a more urban-commercial centre, with housing development and retail and trade receiving strong stakeholder attention. Helao Nafidi has a stronger agricultural and border-trade orientation, with stakeholder views emphasising agriculture, market development, and the role of informal traders and youth. These

differences make it possible to examine whether a common engagement architecture can support locally differentiated LED priorities in the following ways.

The most recent official demographic source is the Namibia Statistics Agency's 2023 Population and Housing Census Regional Profile. In the profile, Eenhana's urban population increased from 5,528 in 2011 to 16,588 in 2023, representing an annual growth rate of approximately 9.2%. Helao-Nafidi increased from 19,375 to 29,119 over the same period, representing an annual growth rate of approximately 3.4% (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2025). Helao-Nafidi was the most populous of the region's three urban localities in both census years, whereas Eenhana recorded the largest proportional increase. The Ohangwena Region had a population of 337,729 in 2023, an area of 10,709 square kilometres, and a population density of 31.54 persons per square kilometre (Namibia Statistics Agency, 2025).

This study addresses a specific empirical and practical gap. Existing debates recognise participation as important for LED, but less is known about how engagement affects LED promotion in smaller Namibian towns and how a framework can translate local evidence into operational responsibilities for LED. Therefore, this study focuses only on Objective 3, which assesses the impact of stakeholder engagement on LED initiatives, and Objective 4, which develops a stakeholder engagement framework for the management and promotion of LED in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils. The objectives are addressed through the following questions.

1. What impact does stakeholder engagement have on promoting LED initiatives in the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils?
2. hrough which mechanisms does engagement influence LED planning, implementation, legitimacy, and outcomes?
3. What institutional and operational components should be included in the stakeholder engagement framework for the two councils?

2. Methods

2.1 Research design: from international methodological logic to local application

This study used a pragmatist philosophical orientation and a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Pragmatism is appropriate when the purpose of research is to understand a practical problem and use different forms of evidence to identify workable solutions. Rather than treating quantitative and qualitative evidence as competing forms of knowledge, the design allowed the study to examine both the distribution of stakeholder perceptions and the processes through which engagement shapes LED. This approach is consistent with collaborative governance research, which treats engagement as both an observable institutional arrangement and a relational process involving trust, dialogue, power, and joint action (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

At the Namibian local level, the design compared the experiences of the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils. The quantitative component surveyed 62 respondents using stratified sampling across relevant stakeholder categories. The qualitative component purposively selected 16 key informants and used interviews and group discussions to explore mechanisms, experiences, challenges, and framework requirements. The institutions and stakeholder groups represented included the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development, Ohangwena Regional Council, two town councils, business representatives, the private sector, financial institutions, civil society organisations, and community-related actors. Direct observation complemented the survey and interview evidence by documenting the infrastructure conditions and visible patterns of inclusion in local engagement settings.

2.2 Data collection and analysis

The quantitative instrument collected perceptions of the economic drivers of LED, the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement, comparative priorities in the two towns, and framework components. The thesis reports the findings as percentages of respondents selecting categories or prioritising. Because some items allowed for multiple responses, the percentages should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive shares of a single total. The basic percentage formula used for transparent reporting is as follows:

$$P = (f / n) \times 100$$

where **P** is the reported percentage, **f** is the number of respondents who selected an option, and **n** is the number of valid respondents.

Descriptive and comparative analyses were used to identify patterns between the two councils. This article reproduces the thesis-reported percentages without recalculating or correcting the source data. In particular, the reported perceived effectiveness categories sum to 103.4%, which indicates a source data inconsistency. The inconsistency is disclosed in the Results section because silently normalising the figures would create a new dataset not contained in the thesis.

Qualitative material was analysed thematically. The analysis focused on how engagement affected LED outcomes, what conditions enabled or constrained impact, and which components stakeholders regarded as necessary for the framework. The main themes relevant to Objectives 3 and 4 were economic sector alignment, infrastructure and service priorities, employment and livelihood expectations, trust and communication, resource alignment and accountability, institutional roles and coordination, cultural responsiveness, inclusion of youth, women, informal traders, and other marginalised groups, and participatory monitoring and evaluation.

The two strands were integrated to explain both the distribution of perceptions and the processes underlying them. This article treats the findings as evidence of perceived and observed impacts rather than as a causal estimate of economic growth.

2.3 Ethical and interpretive boundaries

The underlying thesis obtained permission to collect data and used voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent procedures. The present study did not reproduce personal identifiers. Quotations from the thesis are paraphrased or used sparingly to illustrate the themes. The unit of analysis is stakeholder engagement in LED initiatives at the two town councils, not individual economic performance.

The sample does not support statistical generalisation to all Namibian municipalities, the percentages capture perceptions and priorities rather than independently verified economic changes,

and the framework should be piloted before wider adoption.

3. Results

3.1 Global, African, and Namibian interpretation of impact

Global evidence indicates that the impact of stakeholder engagement depends on whether participation is connected to authority, resources, implementation, and learning. The World Bank Group (2015) finds that participatory and community-driven approaches can support inclusive urban development but also require attention to institutional and power-related constraints. In Africa, the same logic is visible in the need to translate decentralisation into local capacity, financing, and responsive governance (African Union, 2014; Rodríguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2005). The Namibian findings from Eenhana and Helao Nafidi show that engagement was associated with positive LED effects, but the effects were uneven, where participation was fragmented or disconnected from implementation.

The thesis concludes that stakeholder engagement has a positive but uneven impact on LED initiatives (Mwaninga, 2026). When engagement was inclusive and collaborative, projects were more likely to align with community needs, be supported by a broader range of actors, and be sustained beyond the initial planning stage. Where engagement was limited, poorly communicated, or weakly coordinated, initiatives struggled to achieve a long-term impact. This pattern is consistent with collaborative governance theory, which treats trust, dialogue, shared motivation, and joint capacity as conditions for collaborative action rather than automatic results (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Emerson et al., 2012).

3.2 Demographic and institutional setting of the evidence

The 62 survey respondents represented local authorities, regional structures, SMEs and business interests, the Ministry of Urban and Rural Development, financial institutions, business and advocacy bodies, large enterprises and educational institutions. Eenhana respondents formed the largest spatial group in the thesis dataset, while Helao Nafidi and other towns contributed smaller shares. The institutional distribution was important because it brought together actors with different forms of knowledge: councils contributed administrative and planning perspectives; businesses contributed

market and enterprise perspectives; community actors contributed lived experiences; financial institutions contributed information about access to capital; and regional or national actors contributed policy and coordination perspectives.

This diversity supports the argument that stakeholder engagement can improve decision quality by combining knowledge that would otherwise remain separated across institutions (Bingham et al., 2005; Fung, 2006). This also creates a management challenge. Different stakeholders do not necessarily share the same interests, time horizons, risk tolerance, or definitions of success. A council may prioritise infrastructure and revenue, a community may prioritise employment and affordable services, a business may prioritise predictable regulation and market access, and a development partner may prioritise measurable social outcomes. Therefore, the framework requires mechanisms for negotiation and accountability rather than assuming consensus.

3.3 Local economic drivers and the impact pathways of engagement

The thesis identified retail and trade, housing development, and agriculture as important economic drivers (Mwaninga 2026). Retail and trade were identified by 63.6% of respondents, housing development by 57.6%, and agriculture by 27.3%. These results suggest that engagement helped reveal the economic sectors through which stakeholders expect LED to produce local value. Retail and trade are associated with job creation, market access, and income circulation. Housing development is linked to construction, land, material supply, transport, and public services. Agriculture is linked to food security, household income, value addition, and agri-business opportunities.

At the global level, this finding supports place-based approaches that begin with local assets and constraints rather than relying on a standardised sectoral template (Rodríguez-Pose & Tijmstra, 2005). At the African level, it reflects the principle that LED should mobilise endogenous resources and local knowledge while connecting communities to wider markets and institutions (African Union, 2014). At the Namibian level, this indicates that the two councils should not be expected to promote identical LED portfolios. Eenhana's urban-commercial orientation requires attention to housing, retail,

serviced land, market infrastructure, and business linkages. Helao Nafidi's agricultural and border-trade orientation requires attention to agricultural value chains, market rehabilitation, transport, informal trade, and cross-border economic connections.

Table 1. Thesis-reported economic drivers associated with stakeholder engagement and LED promotion

Indicator or sector	Reported finding	Interpretation for LED impact
Retail and trade	63.6% of respondents	Viewed as a major source of jobs, market access, and local income circulation
Housing development	57.6% of respondents	Associated with construction, investment, employment, and service expansion
Agriculture	27.3% of respondents	Associated with food security, household income, agri-business, and value addition
Manufacturing	9% in the reported narrative	An underdeveloped but potentially diversifying sector
Transport, manufacturing, and tourism	6.1% in the reported narrative	Lower-frequency priorities with possible future growth potential
Mining, education, and finance	Approximately 1% in the reported narrative	Underexplored areas requiring stakeholder awareness and diversification work

Note. The table reproduces the thesis's narrative. The source narrative uses overlapping and differently worded categories in some places; therefore, percentages should be treated as reported indicators rather than a mutually exclusive distribution.

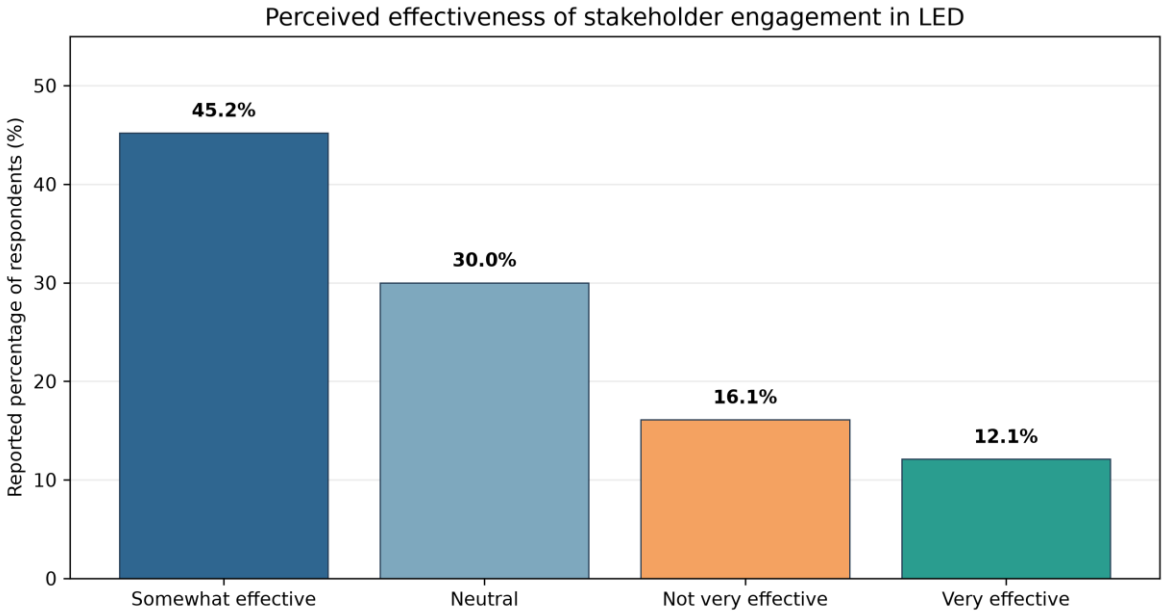


Figure 1. Perceived effectiveness of stakeholder engagement in LED.

The perceived effectiveness results showed a moderate rather than a transformative assessment. Somewhat effective was the largest reported category at 45.2%, followed by neutral at 30.0%, not very effective at 16.1%, and very effective at 12.1%. The pattern indicates that stakeholders recognised value in engagement but did not consistently experience it as being highly effective. The neutral share is important because it may represent uncertainty, limited information or inconsistent exposure to engagement processes. In practical terms, a local authority cannot assume that meetings are evidence of impact. It must show how participation affects priorities, budgets, projects, services, and follow-up.

The reported percentages sum up to 103.4%. Because the thesis does not provide the underlying response frequencies for this item, the present article preserves the reported values and flags the inconsistency, rather than correcting it. This transparency is relevant to the proposed framework: credible monitoring requires traceable denominators, clear response rules, and public explanations of data limitations.

3.4 Comparative impact in Eenhana and Helao Nafidi

The comparative findings show differentiated economic orientations (Mwaninga 2026). In Eenhana, housing development was reported at 35%, agriculture at 25%, transport at 5%, and tourism at 5. Helao Nafidi was reported as prioritising agriculture at 50%, housing development at 20%, transport at 10%, and tourism at 5%. Retail and trade were separately reported for Eenhana at 30%, while the thesis paragraph did not state a paired Helao Nafidi percentage for that category.

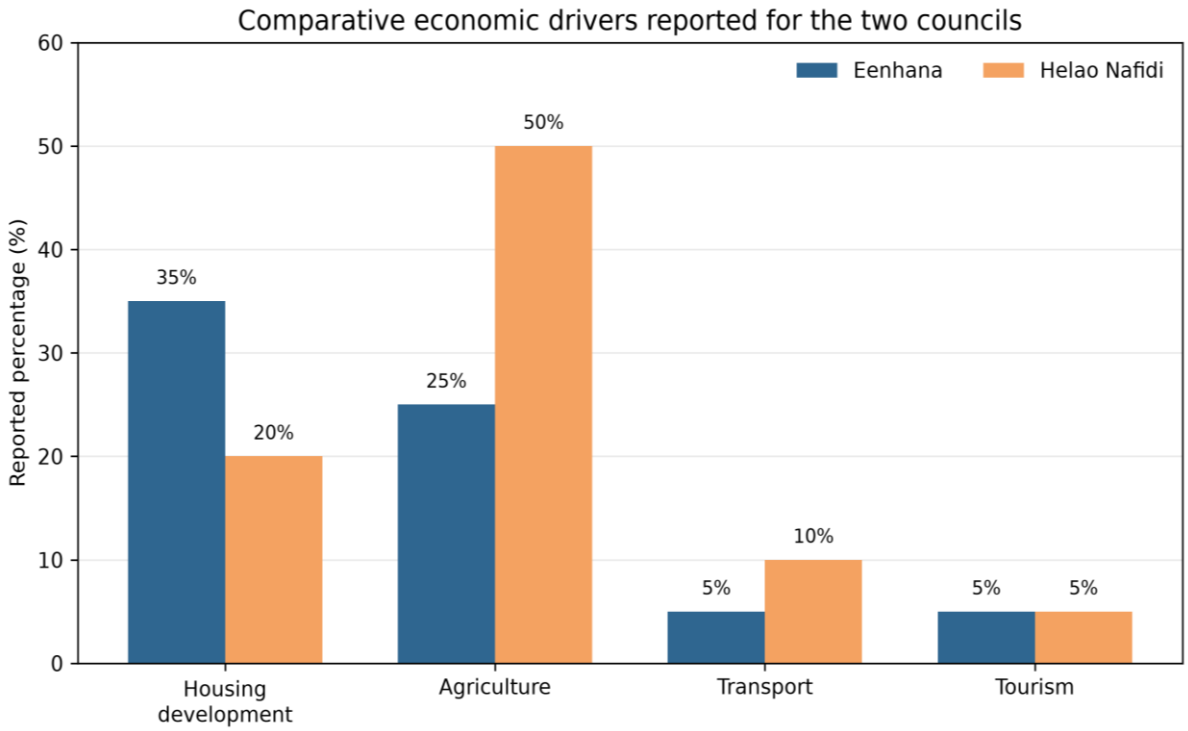


Figure 2. Comparative economic drivers reported for Eenhana and Helao Nafidi.

3.5 Infrastructure, training, partnerships, and transparency as impact mechanisms

The two councils prioritised infrastructure development, technical training, public-private partnerships, and transparency (Mwaninga, 2026). Infrastructure was rated as a priority by 90% of respondents in Eenhana and 85% in Helao Nafidi. Technical training was rated as 80% and 75%, respectively. Public-private partnerships were rated at 70% in Eenhana and 80% in Helao Nafidi. Transparency was rated at 70% in

Eenhana and 65% in Helao Nafidi, Namibia.

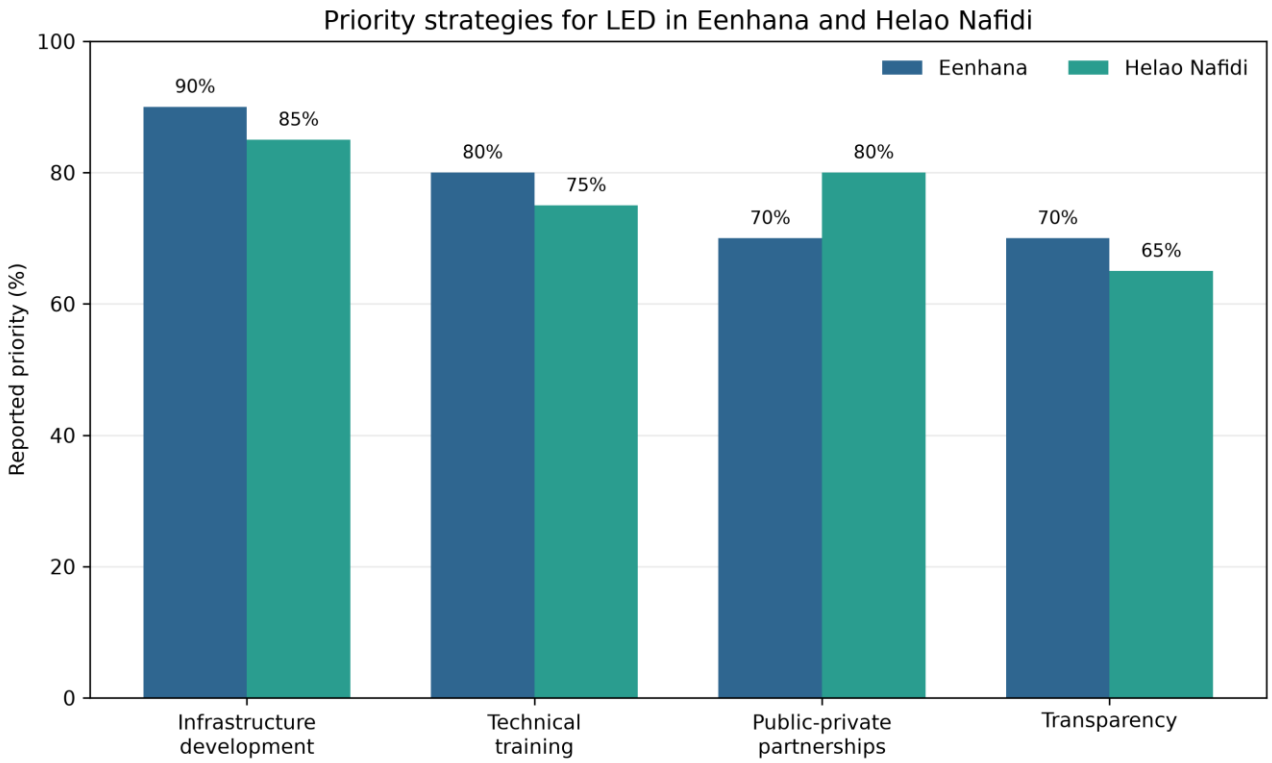


Figure 3. Priority strategies for LED in Eenhana and Helao Nafidi are as follows:

These priorities indicate four pathways through which engagement may affect the LED. First, stakeholders can influence the prioritisation of physical assets such as roads, markets, public buildings, electricity, and serviced land. Second, they can identify skill gaps and help align training with local labour market opportunities. Third, they can support partnerships through which councils, firms, and communities can combine their resources and expertise. Fourth, they can improve transparency by making plans, budgets, decisions, and progress visible.

The observation findings provide a material dimension to these results: roads, public buildings, and market facilities were described as visibly dilapidated in both councils, limiting mobility, business opportunities, and job creation in the area. In Helao Nafidi, stakeholder pressure appeared to influence the council's prioritisation of market rehabilitation. This is an important example of engagement affecting an LED decision: participation did not immediately solve the infrastructure deficit, but it helped connect local pressure to public priority. The distinction between

influence and outcomes must be maintained. Engagement may influence decisions before the full economic benefits become visible.

3.6 Thematic findings on the impact of engagement

Taken together, the qualitative findings indicate that engagement affects LED through five connected mechanisms: alignment of priorities with local needs; improved planning and decision-making; stronger ownership and sustainability; inclusion of groups that are often marginalised; and increased potential for enterprise and livelihood development (Mwaninga, 2026). The evidence does not establish a longitudinal causal estimate of the jobs or revenue generated by engagement. Instead, it identifies the institutional and relational pathways through which engagement legitimises, targets, and implements LED initiatives. This distinction is important for policy because it shows where councils can intervene before longer-term economic outcomes become measurable.

3.7 Framework components identified by stakeholders

The findings of Objective 4 show that stakeholders supported a framework built around eight pillars (Mwaninga, 2026). Trust-building and training mechanisms received the highest reported support (71 %). Resource alignment and accountability followed at 57%, and clear institutional roles and coordination responsibilities at 52%. Approximately 45 respondents stressed the importance of participatory structures and continuous monitoring and evaluation, although the corresponding percentage was not stated in the thesis.

Table 2. Stakeholder-supported components of the proposed framework

Framework component	Reported support	Operational meaning
Trust building and training mechanisms	71%	Build practical capacity, communicate consistently, provide feedback, and fulfil commitments
Resource alignment and accountability	57%	Link budgets and resources to jointly identified priorities and report publicly on

		progress
Institutional roles and coordination responsibilities	52%	Clarify mandates, establish coordination arrangements, and reduce duplication
Participatory structures and monitoring and evaluation	Approximately 45 respondents; percentage not stated	Institutionalise forums, scorecards, monitoring committees, feedback loops, and adaptive learning
Cultural responsiveness	Qualitative theme	Integrate language, local norms, traditional authorities, and culturally legitimate practices
Reinforcing the case for targeted support	Qualitative theme	Use evidence-based LED profiles to attract grants, donors, investment, and technical assistance
Breaking barriers and building voices	Qualitative theme	Include youth, women, informal traders, and other marginalised groups in decision-making
Shaping futures	Qualitative theme	Document lessons, evaluate pilots, share knowledge, and adapt future strategies

The findings show that the framework is not a list of isolated activities. The pillars are interdependent. Training without trust may produce technical capacity without participation. Resources without accountability may increase conflicts and suspicions. Forums without clear roles may generate discussions without implementation. Cultural responsiveness without monitoring may protect legitimacy but fails to show whether initiatives are working. Therefore, the framework treats stakeholder engagement as a system in which institutional, relational, resource,

cultural, and learning dimensions reinforce each other.4. Discussion

4.1 From participation to impact: a global analytical interpretation

The central finding is that stakeholder engagement contributed to LED promotion when connected to decision-making, resources, implementation, and feedback. This finding supports the global shift from participation as consultation to participation as collaborative governance. Ansell and Gash (2008) show that collaboration develops through face-to-face dialogue, trust, commitment, shared understanding, and institutional design. Evidence from Eenhana and Helao Nafidi reflects each of these conditions. Where stakeholders had clearer opportunities to influence priorities, local needs were acknowledged, and council responsiveness was visible, engagement generated stronger ownership and more credible LED pathways.

This finding also supports Emerson et al.'s (2012) distinction between collaborative dynamics and collaborative actions. Engagement creates a platform for principled engagement; however, outcomes depend on shared motivation and capacity for joint action. In both councils, stakeholders identified infrastructure, training, partnerships, and transparency as priorities. These priorities represent potential collaborative action. However, their implementation depends on budgets, institutional mandates, technical capability, and sustained coordination. Therefore, engagement functions as an enabling mechanism, not as a substitute for public administration or economic resources.

The moderate perceived effectiveness distribution is analytically important. Most did not select "very effective", and the neutral category was substantial. This suggests that engagement is present but not fully institutionalised. The global literature warns that participation can become symbolic when stakeholders are asked for their views without receiving information about how those views are used (Arnstein, 1969; Fung, 2006). The practical response is not to automatically increase the number of meetings. This is to improve the quality of the engagement cycle: map stakeholders, define the purpose of participation, disclose constraints, record decisions, provide feedback, assign responsibilities, and monitor whether agreed actions occur.

4.2 African implications: local agency under capacity constraints

In the African context, the results support the proposition that LED should be locally grounded but connected to broader institutional and economic systems. The African Union (2014) frames local development as the mobilisation of resources and capacities to improve livelihoods and transform communities. The two-town evidence shows how local agencies operate in practice. Stakeholders identified sectors that mattered to their communities, expressed concerns about infrastructure and training, and differentiated the towns' economic orientations. However, local agencies are constrained by limited funding, infrastructure deficits, unclear policies, skills gaps, and competing interests.

This combination of local knowledge and structural constraints explains why engagement can produce a positive but uneven impact. Participation may improve the diagnosis of a problem without providing the means to solve it. For example, stakeholders can identify the need for market rehabilitation, but rehabilitation requires capital, procurement, technical expertise, land, maintenance, and management. Therefore, a credible framework must connect participation to resource mobilisation and intergovernmental coordination. The proposed pillars of resource alignment, targeted support, and institutional coordination respond directly to the African implementation reality.

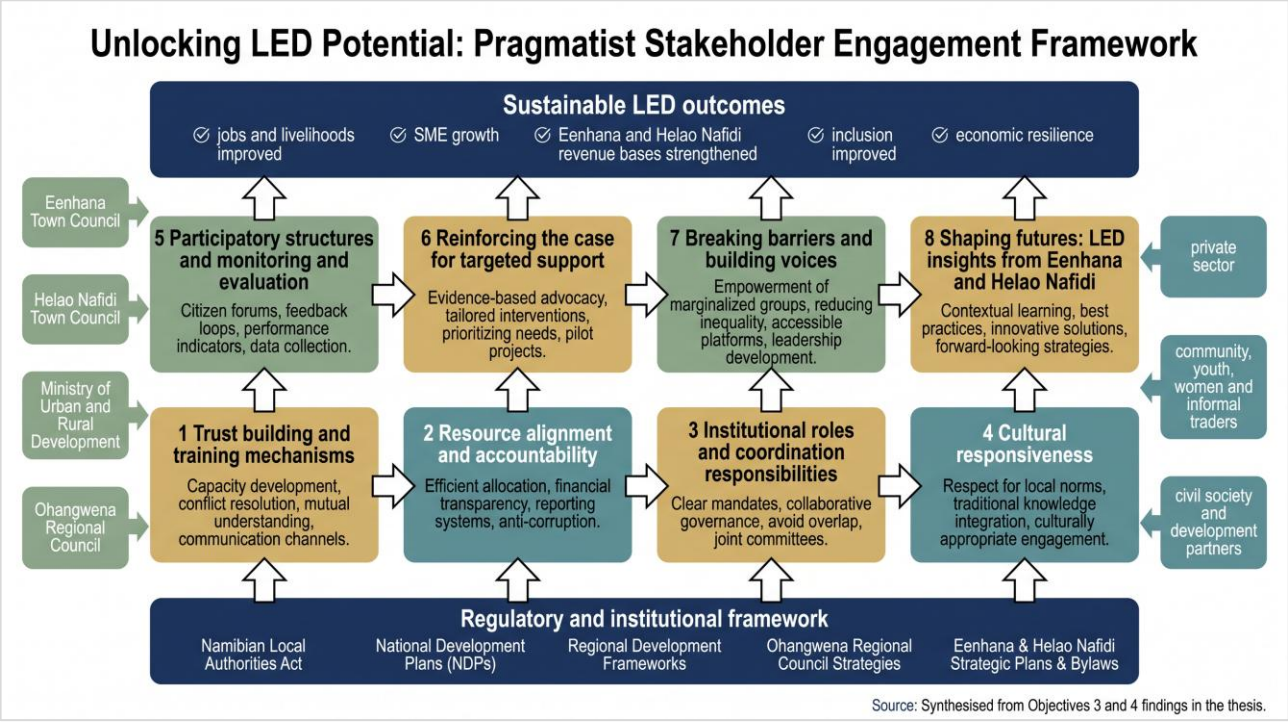
4.3 Namibian and town-level implications

For Namibia, the results indicate that LED policy and practice should distinguish between common governance requirements and differentiated economic priorities. Both councils require transparent communication, clear roles, public reporting, participatory monitoring, training, and mechanisms for resource alignment. However, sectoral applications should differ. Eenhana's stronger emphasis on housing and retail suggests that stakeholder forums should include developers, construction actors, traders, financial institutions, land and infrastructure officials, youth enterprises, and community representatives. Helao Nafidi's stronger emphasis on agriculture and border-related commerce suggests that forums should include farmers, agricultural extension services, traders, transport actors, market managers, informal businesses, border-related institutions, and community groups.

4.4 The proposed framework as a theory of change

The “Unlocking LED Potential: Pragmatist Stakeholder Engagement Framework” can be understood as a theory of change. Its foundation is a regulatory and institutional environment that defines mandates, authority, accountability, and alignment with regional and national development priorities. The first four pillars build the conditions for meaningful engagement: trust and training, resource alignment, clear institutional roles, and cultural responsiveness. The next two pillars connect engagement to implementation and evidence: participatory structures with monitoring and evaluation and targeted support based on local economic profiles. The final two pillars are inclusion and sustainability: breaking barriers and building voices, and shaping futures through learning and adaptation.

Figure 4. Nano Banana infographic of the proposed stakeholder engagement framework.



The framework’s first pillar, trust building and training, responds to the finding that stakeholders engage more meaningfully when they believe that their contributions matter and when they possess the skills to participate. Training should cover financial

literacy, project management, participatory planning, procurement awareness, enterprise development and monitoring. Trust building requires regular communication, reliable feedback, and visible follow-through. Therefore, trust should be treated as an institutional practice rather than a personal attitude.

The second pillar, resource alignment and accountability, addresses the finding that stakeholders may have good ideas but lack the resources to implement them. Participatory budgeting can connect local priorities to available funds, whereas public reporting can show what has been financed, delayed, or revised. Resource alignment should include council revenue, national and regional allocations, private investment, development partner support, and community contributions, where appropriate. Accountability should focus on both financial integrity and responsiveness to the agreed-upon priorities.

The third pillar, institutional roles and coordination, responds to siloed actions and mandate confusion. A stakeholder map should identify each institution's authority, contribution, information requirements, and accountability. A coordination committee or LED forum should not become another bureaucratic layer; its purpose should be to reduce duplication, align actions, resolve disputes, and maintain a shared implementation schedule. Clear responsibility is especially important where LED crosses the boundaries of local authorities, regional councils, ministries, businesses, and community organisations.

The fourth pillar, cultural responsiveness, reflects the thesis finding that engagement should respect local language, norms, customs and traditional authority. Culturally responsive engagement may involve using accessible language, scheduling meetings to enable participation, recognising local leadership structures, and creating safe spaces for women, youth, and informal traders. Cultural responsiveness is not a ceremonial addition to the curriculum. This can affect whether stakeholders trust the process, understand the information, and perceive the framework as legitimate.

The fifth pillar, participatory structures and monitoring and evaluation, makes engagement continuous and ongoing. Councils should establish standing LED forums, citizen scorecards, participatory monitoring committees and regular review sessions. The World Bank (2004) stresses the importance of results-based M&E for accountability and development

effectiveness, while the OECD (2023) shows how process assessment and outcome indicators can be combined to achieve these goals. For the two councils, indicators should include both engagement and LED measures.

4.5 A proposed monitoring formula for implementation

Because this study identified the need for continuous monitoring and evaluation, the framework can be operationalised through a proposed stakeholder engagement implementation index. This is not an empirical result from the thesis; rather, it is a practical measurement tool derived from the eight framework pillars and informed by results-based M&E principles (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2004). Each pillar can be rated by stakeholder groups on a five-point scale, where 1 means “not in place” and 5 means “in place and functioning”. The overall implementation index can be calculated as follows:

$$\textbf{Framework implementation index (FII)} = [\Sigma \text{ pillar ratings} / (8 \times 5)] \times 100$$

The index can be disaggregated by stakeholder groups as follows:

$$\textbf{FII}_g = [\Sigma \text{ pillar ratings for group } g / (8 \times 5)] \times 100$$

A council can report a total score and compare the perceptions of council officials, businesses, community members, civil society, and development partners. The purpose was not to reduce engagement to a single number. Rather, differences between groups can reveal where a framework functions for one group but not for another. A low score for cultural responsiveness among community groups, for example, would require a different response from a low score for resource alignment among the council officials.

Table 3. Proposed monitoring architecture for the framework

Framework pillar	Process indicator	LED outcome indicator	Suggested evidence source	Review frequency
Trust and training	Training sessions, attendance diversity,	Stakeholder confidence and participation continuity	Attendance records, feedback logs, surveys	Quarterly

	feedback response time			
Resource alignment and accountability	Share of LED priorities with identified budgets and public reports	Projects completed against agreed priorities	Budgets, expenditure reports, project registers	Quarterly and annually
Institutional roles and coordination	Signed responsibility matrix and coordination meetings	Reduced duplication and faster issue resolution	Terms of reference, minutes, action trackers	Quarterly
Cultural responsiveness	Use of accessible languages and locally appropriate formats	Participation of culturally and socially diverse groups	Meeting records, participant profiles, qualitative feedback	Quarterly
Participatory structures and M&E	LED forums, scorecards, monitoring committees, public reviews	Adaptive changes made from stakeholder evidence	Scorecards, M&E reports, revised plans	Quarterly and annually
Targeted support	LED profiles, funding proposals, investment leads	Finance mobilised for priority sectors and infrastructure	Profiles, grant applications, investment records	Semi-annually
Barrier reduction and voice-building	Participation of youth, women, informal traders,	Decisions and opportunities benefiting	Disaggregated participation and decision records	Quarterly

	and marginalised groups	underrepresented groups		
Shaping futures	Lessons documented and shared	Improvements incorporated into subsequent plans	Learning reports, revised strategies	Annually

5. Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations for practice: global and African relevance

1. Institutionalise stakeholder engagement as a recurring municipal function.

Globally, effective engagement is connected to planning, budgeting, implementation, and evaluation rather than being treated as a stand-alone consultation (World Bank Group, 2015; OECD, 2023). In African local governments, this requires clear terms of reference, representative stakeholder mapping, predictable meeting cycles, transparent records, and feedback obligations. A forum should have a defined purpose, decision pathway, responsible institution, and a reporting date.

2. Differentiate participation from influence.

Councils should record not only who attended but also what issues were raised, which proposals were accepted or rejected, why decisions were made, and how the implementation changed. This would help address the tokenism identified in this thesis and move participation towards shared problem-solving. This practice is consistent with Arnstein (1969), Fung (2006), and Emerson et al. (2012), who emphasise the importance of authority, deliberation, and joint capacity.

3. Prepare separate but compatible LED profiles for Eenhana and Helao Nafidi.

Each profile should combine demographic data, infrastructure conditions, sector priorities, employment and skills information, stakeholder maps, enterprise opportunities and investment constraints. Eenhana's profile should give particular attention to housing, retail, serviced land, urban infrastructure, construction, and business linkages. Helao Nafidi's profile should give particular attention to agriculture, value addition, market facilities, informal trade, transport, and cross-border economic connections. These profiles should be updated annually.

4. Establish a practical capacity-building program.

Training should be tailored to stakeholder roles rather than delivered as generic workshops. Council officials may require facilitation, data management, procurement, and M&E training. Small businesses may require financial literacy, tender preparation, bookkeeping, and market linkage. Community and youth groups may require project design, advocacy, digital communication skills, and monitoring skills. Informal traders may require information on market facilities, licencing, finance, and representation.

5. Integrate cultural responsiveness into all engagement activities

Meetings and information should use accessible language and, where appropriate, local languages. Councils should consult traditional and community leadership structures without allowing them to replace direct engagement with women, youth, informal traders, and other groups. Cultural responsiveness should be assessed through participant feedback, disaggregated attendance, and influence records.

6. A transparent feedback system should be created.

Every formal engagement activity should generate a short public feedback statement that identifies the issues raised, council responses, responsibilities, timelines, and unresolved matters. Feedback can be provided through noticeboards, local meetings, radio, digital channels, or other accessible formats. This directly responds to the thesis finding that weak feedback mechanisms undermine trust.

5.2 Recommendations for future research

1. A longitudinal evaluation of the framework was conducted.

The current study provides cross-sectional perceptions and qualitative evidence but cannot estimate whether engagement causes changes in employment, enterprise survival, municipal revenue, infrastructure quality, or household livelihoods. A three- to five-year study could establish baseline indicators, implement the framework in phases and compare changes over time.

2. A larger and more balanced sample across stakeholder groups and between the two councils should be used. Because the thesis dataset contains a stronger representation from Eenhana, future research should ensure sufficient Helao Nafidi representation and disaggregate findings by council, gender,

age, sector, stakeholder type, and level of participation. This would help identify whether the framework works differently for council officials, businesses, informal traders, youth, women, and community organisations.

3. Verify perceived LED effects using administrative and economic data. Relevant indicators include the number of new or surviving SMEs, employment generated by local projects, value of local procurement, municipal own-source revenue, market occupancy, serviced plots, infrastructure completion, business registrations, access to finance, and participation in training. Linking these indicators to engagement records would help test whether more inclusive or better coordinated engagement is associated with stronger outcomes.

4. Compare other Namibian councils and comparable border or regional towns in Southern Africa.

Such research could test which elements of the framework are transferable and which require local adaptations. Comparative cases should include towns with different population sizes, economic bases, infrastructure levels, and institutional capacities.

5. Evaluate the digital and hybrid engagement.

Digital portals, SMS platforms, social media, online dashboards, and data collection tools may improve information access, but they can also exclude residents with limited connectivity or digital skills. Therefore, research should examine whether digital tools increase influence and accountability or merely create another channel for one-way information.

6. Refine and validate the proposed Framework Implementation Index. Stakeholder groups could rate the eight pillars at baseline and follow-up, while researchers could compare scores with independent evidence of participation quality and LED outcomes. The index should be treated as a learning tool, not as a performance ranking that encourages councils to report on inflated scores.

6. Conclusion

This study assessed the impact of stakeholder engagement on LED initiatives and developed a stakeholder engagement framework for the Eenhana and Helao Nafidi Town Councils. Evidence shows that engagement has a positive but uneven impact. It improved the identification of local economic priorities, strengthened the

legitimacy of planning, supported infrastructure and training priorities, created opportunities for public-private collaboration, and increased the prospects of ownership and sustainability. Its impact was strongest where stakeholders were included in meaningful decision-making and councils demonstrated responsiveness, transparency, and follow-through.

The comparison also shows that the two councils require differentiated LED applications. Eenhana's engagement and economic priorities were more strongly associated with housing, retail, and urban-commercial development. Helao Nafidi placed greater emphasis on agriculture, market-related activity, transport, and the practical inclusion of informal traders and youth. Therefore, a common framework is appropriate only if it permits local adaptation.

The proposed "Unlocking LED Potential: Pragmatist Stakeholder Engagement Framework" responds to this need. Its eight pillars are trust, training, accountability, coordination, culture, participation, monitoring, targeted support, inclusion, and learning. The framework's central proposition is that engagement becomes economically consequential when it is institutionalised, resourced, transparent, culturally responsive, and connected to adaptive monitoring. For the two councils, the next step is not simply to conduct more consultations but to conduct consultations that are more effective. It is to build a practical system through which stakeholder knowledge influences priorities, resources, implementation, and learning, thereby strengthening the conditions for sustainable LED outcomes.

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