Community Stakeholder Engagement and Perspectives Towards a Megaproject: The case of Western Sydney International Airport

Extended Abstract

Introduction & Research Problem

Megaprojects are large-scale ventures, complex in nature, comprised of several stakeholders and usually cost at least $1 billion (Flyvbjerg, 2018). The upcoming Western Sydney Airport (WSA) that is currently on track to finish construction by 2026 in Badgerys Creek New South Wales Australia (Australian Government, 2022) estimated to cost $5.3 billion AUD (O'Sullivan, 2020) has already impacted the lives of the people residing in the area. The WSA development therefore provides an opportunity to learn amongst many others, about community stakeholder engagement because community members have already expressed their concerns about the infrastructure development (Commonwealth of Australia, 2022). This research investigates the extent of engagement between community stakeholders and WSA and identifies a strategy to promote an effective level of engagement.

While it is well-known that meaningful engagement with diverse and inclusive stakeholders is crucial for the success of such public endeavours, it is widely reported in recent studies by academics that stakeholder engagement is an emergent area of study and that the meaning of "project stakeholder engagement" remains debated and the arrival of consensus outstanding (Kujala, Leinonen, & Laude, 2022). It is also reported by those studying and leading major public infrastructure construction (MPIC) projects that the practice of stakeholder engagement is still sub-optimal – specifically the *how* of stakeholder engagement - with lack of real case studies and evidence from the field (Kujala & Sachs, 2019). Current literature is abound with stakeholder theory and practice insights generally from the perspective of the focal firm or temporary organisation (Eskerod, 2020; Huemann, Eskerod, & Ringhofer, 2016). With community stakeholders in particular, there is frequent oversight and underestimation of community stakeholders' concerns in MPIC projects (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017) which contributes to project disagreements and delays. Therefore, there is a call to understand stakeholder engagement from stakeholders' perspective because their exclusion or marginalisation tend to lead to dissatisfaction which can have detrimental effects on project outcomes (Di Maddaloni & Davis, 2017; Oliver, Cuganesan, & Chung, 2022).

Research Purpose

In this study, we address the lack of research on community stakeholder engagement and the how community stakeholders influence and were influenced by the engagement strategy of project organizations. In particular, the study investigates the attitudes, sentiment and expectations of community stakeholders of the Western Sydney Airport project and adopts the framework for citizenship participation as proposed by Arnstein (1969) and modified for evaluating quality of stakeholder engagement by Friedman and Miles (2006). Finally, the study provides insights into how to integrate views of the community stakeholder into the project.

Brief Methodology & Approach

The study adopted a mixed methods research design to gain insights into the perspectives of local community towards the project using survey methods to gauge attitudes of community stakeholders followed by semi-structured interviews with members of the community as well as project team members in order to triangulate the results (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Using six-point Likert scales of strongly agree to strongly disagree, the survey captured dimensions

of "engagement" through statements such as "*The project organization provides me with information surrounding the project*"; "*The Project team shares/shared findings with me*"; "*The project team recognized that input from community members, such as me, is critical to project success*". For dimensions of "disengagement", statements such as "*I am not regularly updated about developments focussing on the project*"; "*The project team did not provide feedback after taking action to address my concerns*"; "*I was not actively involved by the project organization in the decision-making process of WSA*".

Using a purposive sampling strategy, survey data was collected via questionnaire from residents belonging to local government areas (LGAs) within 25 km radius of WSA development. In keeping with human ethics requirements, a total of 101 valid responses were obtained with consent. For the semi-structured interviews, a total of two community members and four project team members participated, with each interviewing lasting between 30 minutes to 1 hours. Quantitative data was analysed using IBM SPSS while nVIVO was used for coding the interview data and thematic analysis (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2019).

Key Findings

Respondents tended to score low (between "somewhat disagree" to "strongly disagree") for all the items related to the engagement dimension. This indicates that community engagement has been poor or unsatisfactory in the eyes of residents in areas affected by the WSA project. Using the ladder of stakeholder engagement (Friedman & Miles, 2006), it can be inferred that the quality of engagement is at the bottom rung of the ladder ("non-participation"), given all of the median scores for all items in the survey are either 1.0 (20%) or 2.0 (40%) out of a maximum 5.0 (100%).

On the other hand, the median scores for items in the disengagement dimension scored significantly higher in comparison. Median scores of 4.0 and above for all items imply that people tended to agree (and in three cases "strongly agree") with questions that inquired about their feelings and disposition about disengagement or a lack of engagement with members of the project teams in charge of delivering WSA.

To further illustrate the difference in scores for engagement (ENG) and disengagement (DIS) two histograms are presented that show how participants responded to the questions.
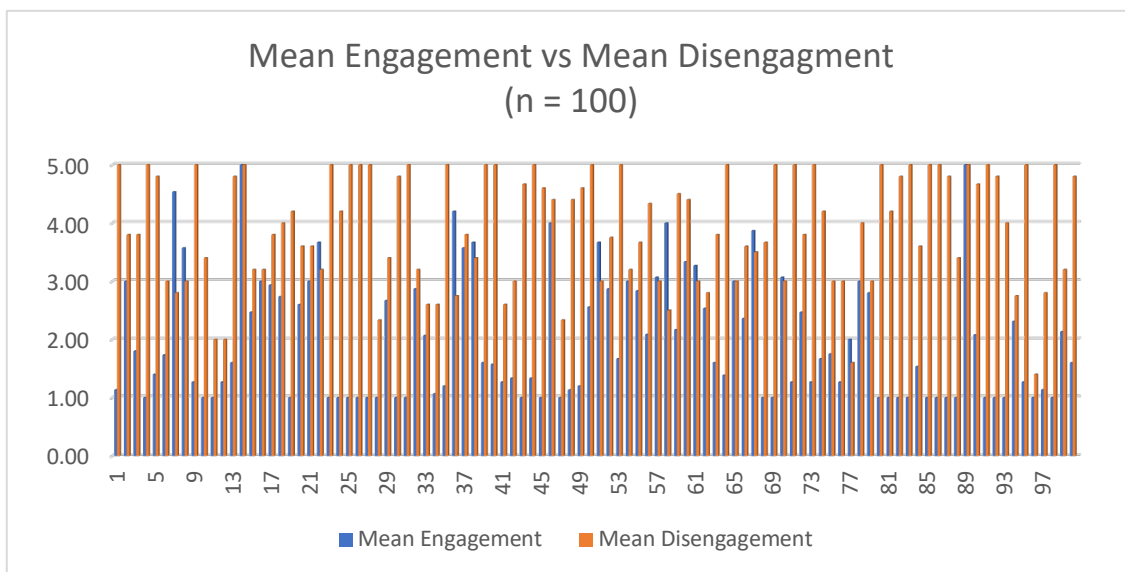
Fig. 1: Mean disengagement (DIS) score of each participant superimposed on the mean engagement (ENG) score of each participant.

The table below summarises key findings with quotes from the semi-structure interviews after the data was transcribed and coded.

Interviewee ID (Stakeholder Type)	Findings and Quotations	Type of Activity
A1 (Community)	Ideal evidence of engagement would be if the project were "not to happen" but knows it is unrealistic	Citizen Control
	Compromised and will accept changes be made to flight paths and time restrictions as engagement	Partnership
A2 (Community)	Seeking direct engagement from the stakeholders and more knowledge	Placation
B1 (Project Team)	Engagement is Environment Impact Assessment done by their client but one that includes talking to community	Consultation
	Accepts usage of newsletters as engagement strategy	Informative
	Recommends Visitor Centre "as a place to ask questions by the community" for two-way communication	Consultation
	He says that surveys are normally done to collect feedback	Consultation
B2 (Project Team)	Continued usage of a bespoke connectivity centre designed with community members	Partnership
B3 (Project Team)	Response to submissions made to project team	Informative
	Search for a win-win situation by offering compensation	Partnership
B4 (Project Team)	Use of bus tours as engagement	Therapy
	Experience centre to learn about the area	Informative
	Knowledge sharing and consultation	Consultation

Table 1. Key findings of results from thematic analysis

The table below summarises key emergent themes.

	Theme	Number of Interviewees	Number of References
1	Evidence of Engagement	4	34
2	Positive Engagement	5	60
3	Negative Engagement	3	56
4	Sentiment	4	48

5	Concern for Community	6	65

Table 2. Emergent themes from qualitative analysis

Implications

The results of this study show that community stakeholders have a level of expectation with regards to stakeholder engagement in the context of megaprojects such as WSA that affects their lifestyle and livelihood. It was identified both qualitatively and quantitatively that they want more engagement, as evidenced from the questionnaire and interviews with community stakeholders. The current level of engagement is unacceptable by their standards, according to the poorly scored results of the survey. However, project team stakeholders are unable to expend efforts needed to reach the average expected levels of engagement demanded by the community stakeholders as presented in Table 1. Two items of the table corresponded to rungs at the level and beyond that of partnership in the ladder of engagement, and one corresponded to the placation rung. The types of activities mostly suggested by project team stakeholders as presented in Table 1 would fall well below that of partnership and even placation, and they are mostly tokenistic activities.

It is, therefore, suggested that a new rung be added between placation and partnership on the ladder of citizen participation which would serve as a compromise between the expectations of community stakeholders and the project team stakeholders. The new rung between placation and partnership would allow for communities to be in a more empowered position than they would find within the placation rung; and they would be able to negotiate the terms related to direct negative consequences as a result of the infrastructure project on their communities with the relevant project authorities. At the same time, the power afforded to the stakeholder would be limited and circumstantial. They would only be given authority and more engagement limited to items that actually impact them; and they would not have the power to make decisions for aspects related to the project that do not harm the community.

It is envisaged that this exploratory research encourage evaluation of stakeholder engagement, particularly from the viewpoint of stakeholders, such as community stakeholders, who are often marginalised or excluded from the project planning and delivery process. While there are limitations to this research, such as not including the voice of the project organisation as to its stakeholder engagement effort (as this is beyond the scope of this study), the results from our sample show that there is a sense of dissatisfaction with the current levels of stakeholder engagement pertaining to the megaproject. Further research is needed to capture a much more holistic viewpoint of the engagement effort and this is possible when views from the project organisation's social impact and community engagement department is considered, as well as incorporating the engagement efforts that are conducted online – e.g. over social media.

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