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Stakeholder Engagement and Project Performance: A Case of the Value-Added Initiative to Boost Employment (VIBE) Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda

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Abstract: *This study examined the effect of stakeholder engagement on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative to Boost Employment (VIBE) Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda. The study focused on four dimensions of stakeholder engagement: communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution. A quantitative cross-sectional research design, supported by qualitative approaches, was adopted. From a population of 792 stakeholders comprising implementing agencies, government institutions, private sector organizations, and women-led MSME beneficiaries, 266 respondents were selected using purposive and systematic random sampling. Data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The findings showed that all four dimensions of stakeholder engagement had a significant positive effect on project performance. Stakeholder communication had the strongest effect ($\beta = 0.284$, $p = 0.000$), followed by stakeholder conflict resolution ($\beta = 0.267$, $p = 0.000$), stakeholder participation ($\beta = 0.241$, $p = 0.000$), and collaborative partnerships ($\beta = 0.219$, $p = 0.001$). The regression model explained 65.9% of the variation in project performance ($R^2 = 0.659$). Qualitative findings, however, indicated that women entrepreneurs had limited influence over resource allocation and strategic decisions, while power imbalances persisted among international partners, government institutions, and beneficiary groups. The study concludes that effective stakeholder engagement is important for improving project performance. Strengthening transparent communication, meaningful participation, coordinated partnerships, and fair conflict-resolution mechanisms can enhance the efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability of multi-stakeholder development projects in Rwanda.*

Keywords: *Stakeholder communication, Stakeholder participation, Collaborative partnerships, Stakeholder conflict resolution, Project performance*

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1. Introduction

In today's increasingly complex development environment, project management has become an essential approach for transforming development goals into measurable socioeconomic outcomes. Although traditional project management has focused mainly on budgeting, scheduling, and quality control, contemporary literature recognizes that project success depends equally on effective stakeholder engagement because projects are implemented within complex social, political, and institutional environments (Silvius & Schipper, 2019; Zhai et al., 2022). Stakeholder Theory, developed by Freeman (1984), argues that organizations achieve better performance when they effectively manage relationships with all individuals and groups who influence, or are influenced by, organizational activities. Within project management, stakeholder engagement is commonly conceptualized through stakeholder communication, stakeholder participation, collaborative partnerships, and stakeholder conflict resolution, dimensions expected to jointly improve project performance measured through efficiency, effectiveness, and beneficiary satisfaction.

Evidence from developed countries shows that projects with effective stakeholder engagement consistently outperform those where stakeholders are poorly managed, through stronger communication systems, collaborative governance, and participatory decision-making (Silvius & Schipper, 2019; Barrientos et al., 2021). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, however, stakeholder engagement remains a major challenge: despite substantial investment in agriculture, infrastructure, education, health, and employment projects, many interventions continue to underperform due to weak communication, inadequate participation, poor institutional coordination, and unresolved conflicts among implementing organizations (Independent Evaluation Group, 2024; Andrews, 2013; Zhai et al., 2022).

Rwanda has emerged as one of Africa's leading countries in implementing development projects through strong government coordination and strategic partnerships with international development agencies. Guided by Vision 2050 and the National Strategy for Transformation (NST2), Rwanda has invested heavily in private sector development, agricultural modernization, employment creation, and export promotion (Muzira et al., 2023). One sector where stakeholder engagement has become particularly important is horticulture, which contributes significantly to employment creation, export diversification, and poverty reduction while providing income opportunities for women and youth. Rwanda's horticulture industry employs more than 100,000 out-grower farmers and continues to receive substantial investment from both government and development partners (REMA, 2024), yet successful implementation requires effective coordination among farmers, cooperatives, processors, exporters, government agencies, financial institutions, and international partners such as TradeMark Africa, ITC SheTrades, the Private Sector Federation (PSF), the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), and the National Agricultural Export Development Board (NAEB).

Despite Rwanda's commitment to gender equality, women entrepreneurs continue to experience significant barriers to participating fully in agricultural value chains. Approximately 68.5% of Rwandan women remain engaged in agriculture, many in informal and low-income activities characterized by limited market access, restricted financial opportunities, and low participation in strategic decision-making (NISR, 2024). Addressing stakeholder power imbalances and promoting inclusive participation are therefore essential for achieving equitable and sustainable development outcomes (Barrientos et al., 2021).

This study focuses on the Value-Added Initiative to Boost Employment (VIBE) Project implemented in Gasabo District, Kigali City, a district with a population exceeding 529,000 people and a large concentration of women-led horticultural enterprises operating within rapidly expanding peri-urban markets (Gasabo District, 2022). Effective stakeholder communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution are expected to influence the overall performance of the VIBE Development Project through improved coordination, resource utilization, beneficiary satisfaction, and achievement of project objectives. However, despite the growing importance of stakeholder engagement, empirical evidence explaining how these specific dimensions influence the performance of the VIBE Development Project in Rwanda remains limited, as most existing studies focus on technical aspects of project implementation while giving limited attention to relational governance mechanisms.

1.1 Problem Statement

Empirical evidence shows that inadequate stakeholder engagement remains a major cause of failure in development projects globally. More than 50% of World Bank-funded projects in Africa fail, compared to a global average of about 40% (World Bank, 2024), while in Rwanda approximately 79% of development projects face implementation challenges largely due to weak stakeholder analysis and engagement (NISR, 2024). KPMG (2024) further identifies poor stakeholder engagement as a key contributor to about 25% of project failures, alongside unclear project objectives.

The VIBE project, implemented in Gasabo District (2023–2028/2029), targets women and youth-led MSMEs in the horticulture export value chain through collaboration among multiple stakeholders, including TradeMark Africa, ITC SheTrades, PSF, RDB, NAEB, and Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe (ITC, 2024). Despite this strong development ambition, Rwanda's horticulture sector still reflects significant structural challenges, as 68.5% of women remain engaged in agriculture, largely in informal and low-skilled jobs (NISR, 2024), limiting inclusive economic transformation. Multi-stakeholder initiatives such as VIBE face implementation risks arising from coordination challenges, power imbalances, and weak institutional alignment: 42% of organizations lack adequate skills to manage multi-stakeholder coordination (PMI, 2023), while poor engagement contributes to communication breakdowns, exclusion from decision-making, and partnership inefficiencies that often result in budget overruns and delays (KPMG, 2024; World Bank, 2024).

In Rwanda, most existing studies focus on technical implementation rather than relational governance aspects such as communication, participation, collaboration, and conflict management (Muzira et al., 2023; NISR, 2024), leaving limited empirical evidence on how these stakeholder engagement dimensions influence project performance in horticulture value chain interventions. This study therefore examined the effect of stakeholder engagement, specifically communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution, on the performance of the VIBE project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

1.2 The study was guided by the following objectives:

General objective

To evaluate the role of stakeholder engagement on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda

Specific objective

1. To determine the effect of stakeholder communication on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

2. To examine the effect of stakeholder participation on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

3. To evaluate the effect of collaborative partnerships on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

4. To assess the influence of stakeholder conflict resolution on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

1.3 The study tested the following null hypotheses:

H01: Stakeholder communication has no significant effect on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

H02: Stakeholder participation has no significant effect on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

H03: Collaborative partnerships have no significant effect on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

H04: Stakeholder conflict resolution has no significant effect on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda.

2. Literature Review

This chapter covers the conceptual review, theoretical frameworks, and empirical studies relating to the research variables. It also presents the conceptual framework and the research gap that the study addresses.

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Stakeholder Communication

Communication is a critical dimension of stakeholder engagement that influences project performance through effective information sharing, coordination, and decision-making. Communication involves the timely dissemination of relevant information to stakeholders to support informed decisions and implementation (Zhai et al., 2022). Effective communication promotes transparency, trust, and collaboration, ensuring that project objectives, expectations, and responsibilities are clearly understood. Recent studies emphasize that communication should be continuous, interactive, and responsive rather than limited to one-way information dissemination; project success depends on communication practices that foster participation and organizational cohesion (Muzira et al., 2023), and the quality and frequency of communication significantly influence stakeholder commitment and support (Marx et al., 2024). Communication failures are among the leading causes of project underperformance in international development initiatives (Zhai et al., 2022).

2.1.2 Stakeholder Participation

Stakeholder participation enhances project performance through active involvement in planning, decision-making, implementation, and monitoring. Meaningful participation improves project relevance, ownership, and alignment with stakeholder needs (Zhai et al., 2022). The quality of participation matters more than mere presence: genuine involvement in decision-making strengthens commitment and reduces resistance (Muzira et al., 2023), and stakeholders who have actual influence over project decisions are more likely to support implementation and long-term sustainability (Marx et al., 2024). Participatory approaches also improve project adaptability by enabling continuous feedback and collaborative problem-solving throughout the project lifecycle (Zhai et al., 2022).

2.1.3 Collaborative Partnerships

Collaborative partnerships refer to the cooperative relationships established among stakeholders to achieve shared objectives through resource sharing, joint decision-making, and coordinated action. Such partnerships strengthen coordination, improve stakeholder commitment, and facilitate the achievement of project goals through collective effort (Zhai et al., 2022). Successful partnerships require clear governance structures, defined roles, and effective coordination mechanisms; partnership effectiveness depends on role clarity, transparent decision-making, and collaborative problem-solving (Marx et al., 2024), while strong partnerships improve outcomes by promoting cooperation, reducing conflicts, and enhancing institutional coordination (Muzira et al., 2023).

2.1.4 Stakeholder Conflict Resolution

Stakeholder conflict resolution refers to the mechanisms used to manage disagreements arising from divergent interests, expectations, and power asymmetries among stakeholders. Conflict is an inherent feature of multi-stakeholder projects and must be addressed through structured institutional mechanisms rather than ignored (Zhai et al., 2022); conflicts often emerge from power imbalances, differing accountability systems, and institutional diversity among implementing partners (Marx et al., 2024). Formal mechanisms such as mediation, negotiation, and facilitated dialogue enhance coordination and reduce disputes (Zhai et al., 2022), and projects with clear conflict-management procedures perform better than those relying on informal or ad hoc responses (Bjorvatn & Wald, 2018).

2.1.5 Project Performance

Project performance in this study refers to the extent to which the VIBE project achieves its intended objectives in terms of efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. Contemporary scholarship expands project performance beyond the traditional "iron triangle" of time, cost, and scope to include stakeholder satisfaction, long-term value creation, and adaptive capacity (Zhai et al., 2022), while performance in multi-stakeholder initiatives should also capture partnership resilience and adaptability rather than mere compliance with predefined indicators (Marx et al., 2024). In the VIBE context, performance is understood as a combination of efficiency, effectiveness, beneficiary and partner satisfaction, and sustainability outcomes.

2.2 Theoretical Review

2.2.1 Stakeholder Theory

Stakeholder Theory, introduced by Freeman (1984), challenges the shareholder-centred view of management by arguing that organizations must create value for all groups affected by their activities. The theory is directly relevant to this study as it provides the conceptual foundation linking stakeholder engagement to project performance: its instrumental dimension suggests that effective communication, participation, collaboration, and conflict resolution improve project performance, aligning with the study's independent and dependent variables (Freeman et al., 2010; Barrientos et al., 2021; Marx et al., 2024). A key limitation is that the theory offers limited guidance on prioritizing competing stakeholder interests under resource constraints and assumes relatively rational and cooperative relationships, whereas power imbalances often distort engagement in practice. Despite this, the theory remains highly suitable for explaining how stakeholder engagement mechanisms influence the performance of the VIBE project.

2.2.2 Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory, developed by Scott (2014), explains that organizational behaviour is shaped by regulative, normative, and cognitive institutional pillars, and that organizations seek legitimacy by conforming to institutional pressures even where this may not maximize technical efficiency. This helps explain how stakeholder engagement practices in the VIBE project are shaped by donor requirements, government regulations, and professional development norms (Mohammadnezhad et al., 2025; Rees et al., 2024). A limitation is that the theory overemphasizes conformity and legitimacy-seeking behaviour while giving less attention to internal agency and innovation, yet it remains relevant for explaining how institutional pressures influence stakeholder engagement and performance in the VIBE project.

2.2.3 Conflict Management Theory

Conflict Management Theory, developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), identifies five conflict-handling styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating, based on the dimensions of assertiveness and cooperativeness. The theory argues that no single style is universally effective; rather, appropriate conflict resolution depends on the context of the disagreement. Structured conflict-resolution mechanisms such as mediation, negotiation, and facilitated dialogue improve coordination and outcomes (Zhai et al., 2022), while unmanaged conflicts often lead to resistance, delays, and poor performance (Marx et al., 2024). This theory provides a framework for assessing whether conflicts in the VIBE project are handled collaboratively, competitively, or through avoidance, and how these approaches affect efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability.

2.3 Empirical Review

2.3.1 Stakeholder Communication and Project Performance

Zhai et al. (2022), in a cross-country study of 127 development projects across 42 countries, found that communication breakdowns accounted for 34% of project performance failures, exceeding technical and financial constraints, and recommended strengthening feedback systems and stakeholder responsiveness. Marx et al. (2024), studying 34 agricultural development projects in East Africa, found that structured and well-coordinated communication was associated with 28% higher performance than weak communication systems. Muzira et al. (2023), reviewing 47 development projects in Rwanda, found that poor stakeholder communication was among the leading causes of underperformance, with 67% of respondents identifying communication gaps as a major challenge.

2.3.2 Stakeholder Participation and Project Performance

Bjorvatn and Wald (2018), studying 189 projects in Asia and Nordic countries, found that participatory decision-making significantly improved project effectiveness and stakeholder satisfaction, with stronger effects over time. Serrador and Turner (2015), analysing 1,424 projects from the Construction Industry Institute database, found that projects with early stakeholder involvement achieved better cost and schedule performance than those with limited participation. Marx et al. (2024), studying multi-stakeholder development projects in East Africa, found that meaningful participation, where stakeholders influence decisions rather than being merely consulted, improved project performance by 26%, and recommended strengthening inclusive decision-making structures for low-power groups such as women and community beneficiaries.

2.3.3 Collaborative Partnerships and Project Performance

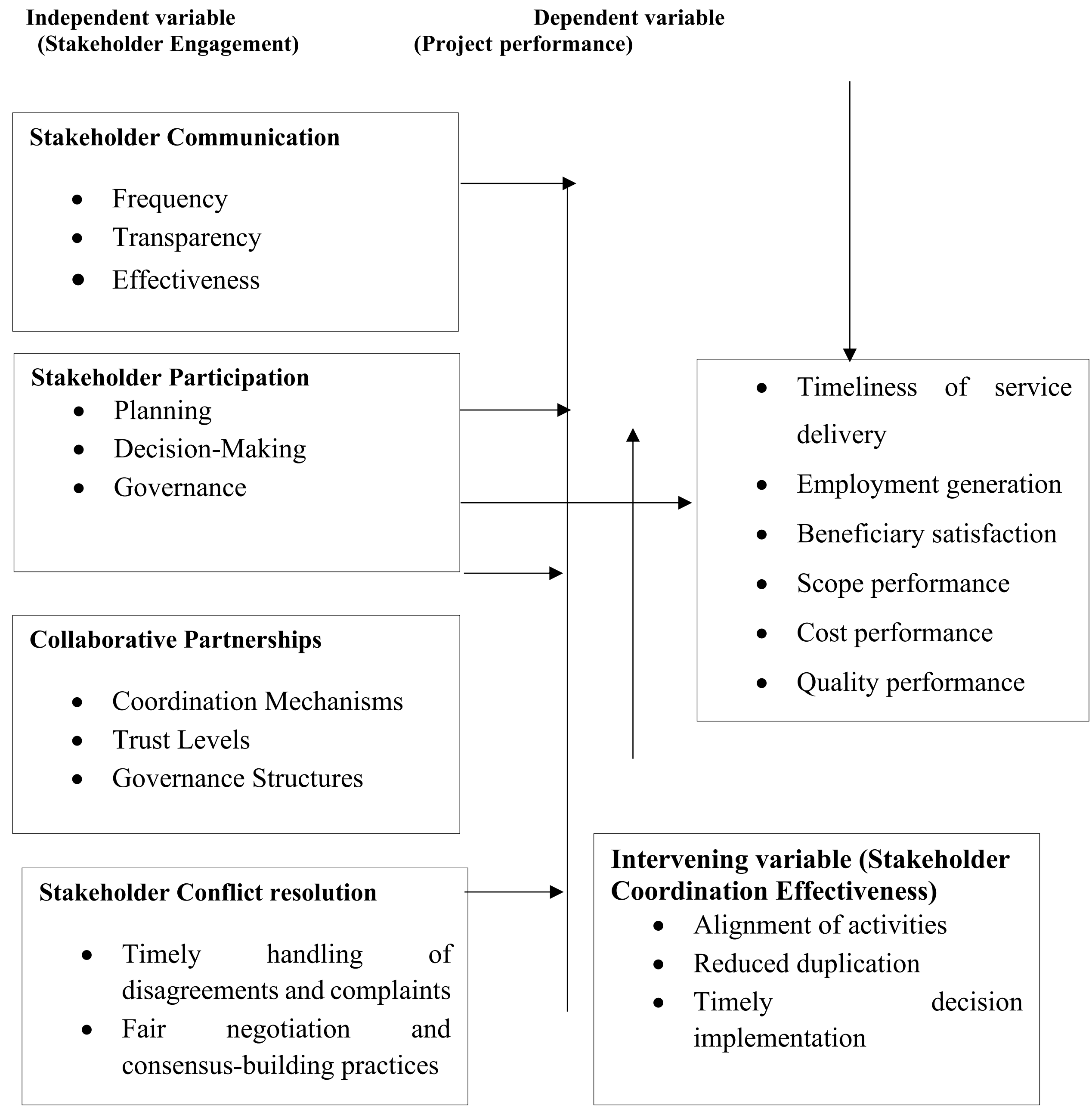
Aga et al. (2016), in a study of 312 projects across Europe and Asia, found that trust and coordination between partners explained 29% of the variation in project success beyond individual organizational capacity, reducing coordination costs and improving problem-solving speed. Zhai et al. (2022), reviewing 89 international development projects, found that formal coordination structures were stronger predictors of performance than partnership duration. Marx et al. (2024), studying 34 agricultural development projects in East Africa, found that heterogeneous partnerships performed worse than aligned institutional partnerships due to governance challenges, but that projects with formal coordination tools such as steering committees and dispute-resolution mechanisms achieved significantly better performance.

2.3.4 Stakeholder Conflict Resolution and Project Performance

Jaldesa (2025), studying 238 stakeholders in construction projects in Ethiopia, found that stakeholder identification, engagement planning, and managing engagement significantly improved project success, and recommended proactive stakeholder planning and early conflict prevention. Akhtar et al. (2020), surveying financial institutions in Pakistan, found a significant positive relationship between conflict-management techniques and organizational performance, showing that formal dispute-resolution mechanisms outperform informal approaches. Liu et al. (2020), examining international engineering joint ventures, found that collaborative conflict resolution reduces the negative effects of cultural diversity on project performance, while competitive and avoidance strategies worsen outcomes.

2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework drawing on Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984) and the works of Bourne and Walker (2005), Mok et al. (2015), Zhai et al. (2022), and Marx et al. (2024), which proposes that the performance of the VIBE project depends on the quality of stakeholder engagement. The framework conceptualizes stakeholder engagement through four interrelated dimensions, stakeholder communication, stakeholder participation, collaborative partnerships, and stakeholder conflict resolution, as independent variables, with project performance as the dependent variable. Effective communication promotes participation, participation strengthens collaboration, and strong collaboration supports effective conflict resolution; together these dimensions enhance stakeholder coordination effectiveness through better alignment of activities, reduced duplication, and timely implementation of decisions, ultimately improving the performance of the VIBE project.



Source: Researcher's Conceptualization, 2026
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

2.5 Research Gap

Despite growing global evidence on stakeholder engagement and project performance, critical gaps remain in the Rwandan and VIBE context. Empirical research in Rwanda remains limited: existing reviews (Muzira et al., 2023; NISR, 2024) lack rigorous primary empirical analysis of how engagement mechanisms influence performance, and given Rwanda's unique institutional environment of strong state coordination and active development-partner involvement, findings from other contexts may not fully explain local engagement–performance dynamics. Sector-specific evidence on agricultural value chain and horticulture development also remains scarce compared with infrastructure or social-service sectors (Barrientos et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2022), and empirical studies on conflict resolution and power asymmetry in Rwanda are almost nonexistent (Silvius & Schipper, 2019). Furthermore, no published studies have specifically evaluated the VIBE project or similar youth-employment initiatives in Rwanda, and most existing research relies on single-source data and limited stakeholder perspectives (Bjorvatn & Wald, 2018). This study addresses these gaps by providing multi-informant, context-specific evidence on stakeholder engagement and project performance in Gasabo District.

3. Methodology

Research Design: The study employed a quantitative cross-sectional research design supported by qualitative approaches to assess the effect of stakeholder engagement on the performance of the VIBE project. The quantitative approach aligns with the study's aim of testing proposed relationships between engagement dimensions and performance, facilitating statistical inference and generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), while open-ended questions embedded in the survey provided contextual depth to explain the quantitative findings without altering the study's explanatory focus. Cross-sectional data were collected at a single point during the project's initial implementation phase, sufficient for establishing baseline correlations for a Master's-level study.

Population and Sample: The target population comprised 792 stakeholders directly involved in the VIBE project in Gasabo District, drawn from implementing agencies (Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe, TradeMark Africa, ITC SheTrades Rwanda, PSF, RDB, and NAEB), government agencies, private sector organizations, and women-led MSME beneficiaries. Using Slovin's formula with a 5% margin of error, a sample of 266 respondents was determined and drawn through purposive sampling for implementing agencies, government agencies, and private sector organizations (based on direct project responsibility and at least six months of involvement), and systematic random sampling for beneficiary enterprises to ensure diversity across horticulture sub-sectors and enterprise sizes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Muzira et al., 2023).

Data Collection Tools: Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, complemented by secondary data from VIBE project documentation and partner reports. Data quality was ensured through pilot testing, expert validation of content and construct validity, and reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha. Coded responses were entered into SPSS for descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple linear regression analysis, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically.

Reliability: Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed for each construct to assess internal consistency, with a threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable for social science research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). All constructs exceeded this threshold, confirming that the instrument was reliable and appropriate for statistical analysis.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Variable	Number of items	Cronbach's Alpha
Stakeholder communication	8	0.86
Stakeholder participation	7	0.84
Collaborative partnerships	6	0.88
Stakeholder conflict resolution	7	0.82
Project performance	10	0.89
Overall instrument	38	0.87

Source: Field data, 2026

Before data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants, including implementing-agency staff, government officials, and beneficiary stakeholders, after they were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw at any time, and the confidentiality of their responses.

Data were anonymized and securely stored, with identifying information removed and replaced with code numbers accessible only to the researcher and supervisor. Given the unequal power relations among VIBE stakeholders, beneficiaries who provided critical feedback were protected from potential retaliation by using the project's existing communication channels rather than agency-mediated contact.

4. Results and Discussion

Of the 266 questionnaires and interview schedules distributed to respondents involved in the VIBE Development Project in Gasabo District, 252 were successfully completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 94.7%. A total of 14 questionnaires were not returned or were incomplete, representing 5.3% of those issued. This response rate exceeds the minimum threshold of 70% recommended for social science research and indicates strong engagement with respondents, enhancing the credibility of the data gathered for subsequent analysis.

4.1 Correlation Analysis

This section presents the Pearson correlation analysis conducted to determine the strength and direction of the association between stakeholder communication, stakeholder participation, collaborative partnerships, stakeholder conflict resolution, and the performance of the VIBE Development Project.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Stakeholder communication	1				
2. Stakeholder participation	0.721**	1			
3. Collaborative partnerships	0.688**	0.705**	1		
4. Stakeholder conflict resolution	0.734**	0.742**	0.711**	1	
5. Project performance	0.763**	0.781**	0.754**	0.792**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Source: Field data, 2026

Table 2 shows that all four stakeholder engagement dimensions have a strong, positive, and statistically significant correlation with project performance at the 1% level. Stakeholder communication correlates positively with project performance ($r = 0.763$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that improved information sharing, transparency, and timely communication are associated with better project outcomes. Stakeholder participation also shows a strong positive correlation with project performance ($r = 0.781$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that greater involvement of beneficiaries and other actors in planning and decision-making contributes to improved performance. Collaborative partnerships correlate positively with project performance ($r = 0.754$, $p < 0.01$), reflecting the value of coordination, trust, and resource sharing among implementing agencies, while stakeholder conflict resolution recorded the strongest correlation with project performance ($r = 0.792$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that effective conflict resolution and fair distribution of influence are important factors in achieving successful project outcomes.

4.2 Regression Analysis

This section analyzes how stakeholder communication, stakeholder participation, collaborative partnerships, and stakeholder conflict resolution jointly and individually influence the performance of the VIBE Development Project, including model fit, ANOVA results, coefficient analysis, and hypothesis testing.

Table 3: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.812	0.659	0.652	0.41

a. Predictors: (Constant), Stakeholder conflict resolution, Collaborative partnerships, Stakeholder participation, Stakeholder communication. b. Dependent Variable: Project performance. Source: Field data, 2026

Table 3 shows an R-value of 0.812, reflecting a strong overall correlation between the combined stakeholder engagement dimensions and project performance. The R Square value of 0.659 indicates that 65.9% of the variability in the performance of the VIBE Development Project is explained by stakeholder communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution, while the remaining 34.1% is attributable to other factors such as funding conditions, institutional capacity, and external environmental factors. The adjusted R^2 of 0.652 confirms the model's strength after accounting for the number of predictors, and the standard error of the estimate (0.41) indicates that the predicted values are reasonably close to the observed values.

Table 4: ANOVA

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	58.42	4	14.605	86.73	.000
Residual	30.18	247	0.122		
Total	88.60	251			

Source: Field data, 2026

Table 4 displays the ANOVA results, showing an F-statistic of 86.73 with a significance value of 0.000. Since the p-value is below the 0.05 threshold, the overall regression model is statistically significant, confirming that stakeholder communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution jointly exert a significant influence on the performance of the VIBE Development Project and that the model effectively represents the data gathered in Gasabo District.

Table 5: Coefficients

Predictor variable	Beta (β)	Std. Error	t-value	Sig. (p-value)
(Constant)	0.812	0.221	3.67	.000
Stakeholder communication	0.284	0.061	4.66	.000
Stakeholder participation	0.241	0.058	4.16	.000
Collaborative partnerships	0.219	0.064	3.42	.001
Stakeholder conflict resolution	0.267	0.059	4.53	.000

Source: Field data, 2026

Table 5 presents the regression coefficients explaining the individual contribution of each stakeholder engagement dimension to the performance of the VIBE Development Project. The regression equation is expressed as $Y = 0.812 + 0.284X_1 + 0.241X_2 + 0.219X_3 + 0.267X_4 + \varepsilon$, where Y represents project performance, and X_1 to X_4 represent stakeholder communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution respectively.

Stakeholder communication exerted the strongest positive and statistically significant effect on project performance ($\beta = 0.284$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), indicating that a one-unit improvement in communication practices increases project performance by 0.284 units, holding other variables constant. This underscores the importance of transparent information sharing, timely updates, and effective feedback mechanisms. Stakeholder conflict resolution was the second strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.267$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), demonstrating that effective conflict resolution and balanced stakeholder influence contribute significantly to project performance. Stakeholder participation also had a significant positive effect ($\beta = 0.241$, $p = 0.000 < 0.05$), confirming that involving stakeholders in planning, decision-making, and monitoring enhances ownership and effectiveness. Lastly, collaborative partnerships significantly influenced project performance ($\beta = 0.219$, $p = 0.001 < 0.05$), the smallest of the four coefficients but still confirming that coordination, trust, and shared responsibility among implementing agencies improve project implementation.

Table 6: Hypothesis Testing Results

Null Hypothesis (H0)	p-value	Decision at α = 0.05
H01: Stakeholder communication has no significant effect on project performance	.000	Rejected H01
H02: Stakeholder participation has no significant effect on project performance	.000	Rejected H02
H03: Collaborative partnerships have no significant effect on project performance	.001	Rejected H03
H04: Stakeholder conflict resolution has no significant effect on project performance	.000	Rejected H04

Source: Field data, 2026

Table 6 shows the null hypotheses, p-values, and decisions regarding the role of stakeholder engagement in shaping the performance of the VIBE Development Project in Gasabo District. All four null hypotheses were rejected because their p-values were below 0.05, confirming that stakeholder communication, participation, collaborative partnerships, and conflict resolution each have statistically significant positive effects on project performance, with stakeholder communication the strongest predictor, closely followed by conflict resolution.

The findings of this study indicate that all four stakeholder engagement dimensions have significant positive effects on project performance in the VIBE Development Project. These results are consistent with existing research on stakeholder engagement and project performance. The positive effect of stakeholder communication is supported by Zhai et al. (2022) and Muzira et al. (2023), who found that communication breakdowns are a leading cause of underperformance, while structured communication improves coordination and outcomes. The importance of stakeholder participation is supported by Bjorvatn and Wald (2018) and Serrador and Turner (2015), who showed that early and meaningful stakeholder involvement improves project effectiveness, cost, and schedule performance. The significant contribution of collaborative partnerships confirms Aga et al. (2016) and Marx et al. (2024), who established that trust, coordination, and formal governance structures among partners improve project success. The strong effect of stakeholder conflict resolution is consistent with Jaldesa (2025), Akhtar et al. (2020), and Liu et al. (2020), who found that structured, collaborative conflict-management mechanisms outperform informal or avoidance-based approaches, particularly in culturally and institutionally diverse project environments.

Beyond the statistical results, qualitative findings nuance this picture: although stakeholders across categories were generally satisfied with communication, participation, partnership, and conflict-resolution structures, women entrepreneurs retained limited influence over resource allocation and other strategic decisions, and power imbalances persisted between international partners, government institutions, and beneficiary groups. These qualitative insights are consistent with Barrientos et al. (2021) and Marx et al. (2024), who emphasize that unmanaged power asymmetries can undermine the benefits of otherwise well-functioning engagement structures in Global South value-chain and development projects.

4.3 Implications of the study

The implications are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the results support the tenets of Stakeholder Theory (Freeman, 1984), Institutional Theory (Scott, 2014), and Conflict Management Theory (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) by demonstrating how specific engagement dimensions relate to project performance in a multi-stakeholder, donor-supported development initiative. Practically, the findings suggest to implementing agencies (Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe, TradeMark Africa, ITC SheTrades, PSF, RDB, and NAEB) that stakeholder communication and conflict-resolution mechanisms deserve the greatest attention, given their strongest predictive power, while participation and collaborative partnerships should also be strengthened and institutionalized from the planning stage onward.

For policymakers and development partners in Rwanda, the study provides evidence to support more inclusive, context-sensitive multi-stakeholder governance in value-chain and enterprise-development projects. The substantial explanatory power of the model (65.9%) also suggests that other factors, such as funding continuity, institutional capacity, and the broader policy environment, should be considered alongside stakeholder engagement to achieve full project performance. The study can inform the design and management of similar horticulture, agribusiness, and women- and youth-focused enterprise projects in Rwanda and beyond.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study examined the effect of stakeholder engagement, specifically stakeholder communication, stakeholder participation, collaborative partnerships, and stakeholder conflict resolution, on the performance of the Value-Added Initiative to Boost Employment (VIBE) Development Project in Gasabo District, Rwanda. The findings confirm that stakeholder engagement is a significant determinant of the VIBE project's performance. Effective communication, though supported by functional meetings, reports, and digital platforms, still faces weaknesses in timeliness and feedback, and its strengthening would enhance transparency and stakeholder satisfaction. Stakeholder participation is positively perceived at the consultative level but remains limited in terms of influence over resource allocation and strategic decisions, suggesting that meaningful participation should move beyond consultation toward genuine shared decision-making, particularly for women-led MSMEs. Collaborative partnerships among implementing agencies contribute significantly to performance through clear roles and coordination, although institutional procedures and funding arrangements can still constrain full collaboration. Stakeholder conflict resolution and power management significantly influence performance, yet power imbalances between international partners, government institutions, and beneficiaries persist and warrant continued attention. Overall, the study concludes that strengthening stakeholder engagement, communication, participation, collaboration, and conflict resolution together, is essential for improving the efficiency, effectiveness, beneficiary satisfaction, and long-term sustainability of the VIBE project and similar multi-stakeholder development initiatives in Rwanda.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made to strengthen stakeholder engagement and enhance the performance of the VIBE project and similar initiatives:

1. Strengthen stakeholder communication: Implementing agencies should ensure that information is shared not only frequently but also in a timely, clear, and simplified manner, with more interactive channels such as community meetings, SMS updates, and feedback platforms to support two-way rather than top-down communication, particularly for women-led MSMEs.
2. Deepen stakeholder participation: Project teams should move beyond consultation toward genuine shared decision-making by strengthening beneficiary representation in committees, increasing participation in planning forums, and ensuring that feedback collected from stakeholders is visibly reflected in project decisions, especially regarding resource allocation.
3. Strengthen collaborative partnerships: Implementing agencies such as Pro-femmes Twese Hamwe, TradeMark Africa, ITC SheTrades, PSF, RDB, and NAEB should clarify roles, harmonize reporting systems, and hold regular joint planning and review meetings, building trust through shared accountability frameworks.
4. Improve conflict resolution and power management: The project should establish more structured conflict-resolution mechanisms that ensure fairness and equal voice among stakeholders, with specific protection measures to safeguard women entrepreneurs and other low-power stakeholders so that their contributions meaningfully influence project outcomes.
5. Inform policy and future project design: Policymakers and development partners should use these findings to design more inclusive, context-sensitive development programmes that prioritize relational governance, communication, participation, partnership quality, and power balance, alongside technical implementation, to achieve sustainable results for intended beneficiaries.

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