STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION AS A DETERMINANT OF SUSTAINABLE PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Anna DZIADKIEWICZ[1*], Ewelina SOKOŁOWSKA[2], Magdalena JERZEMOWSKA[3]

[1] Uniwersytet Gdański, Wydział Zarządzania; anna.dziadkiewicz@ug.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0003-1880-4077
[2] Uniwersytet Gdański, Wydział Zarządzania; ewelina.sokolowska@ug.edu.pl, ORCID: 0000-0002-0470-9530
[3] Uniwersytet Gdański, Wydział Zarządzania; malgorzata.jerzemowska@ug.edu.pl,
ORCID: 0000-0002-9282-0000
* Correspondence author

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to present part of a report on stakeholder analysis (indicating the importance of stakeholder identification and prioritisation) in projects implemented by sustainability-oriented teams.

Design/methodology/approach: The results were obtained based on a focus group interview with forty-eight participants – representtatives of different organisations, experienced in project management and possessing expertise on the tourism industry in Pomerania. The study was carried out in Gdańsk, from May to September 2021.

Findings: The results of the study showed that an effective policy regarding sustainable development measures should be based on intensive stakeholder outreach. The determinant of this effectiveness is to entail proper and comprehensive stakeholder identification, which can play a key role in the success of any investment.

Research limitations/implications: The purpose of the marketing research on stakeholder identification and mapping is to provide insights on the public opinion in this regard. In the course of the study, some limitations were recognised. Firstly, the sampling techniques involving audience generation and data filtering, such as data collection from only those persons who had participated in a focus survey, certainly resulted in a bias in the type of the data collected. Secondly, the study, due to the outbreak of the pandemic, was limited to 2021 only, and despite the implementation of selected projects in five countries in the South Baltic region, it was conducted in Poland exclusively, due to limited travel possibilities.

Practical implications: The research was commissioned by a real project team and concerned the operating environment of the tourism enterprises in the Pomerania region. The survey results were applied in practice and served as a project implementation indicator.

Social implications: The research topic of stakeholder identification as a component of sustainable development policy undoubtedly has impact on the society. This is because it leads to the promotion of an approach that takes the balance between the actions undertaken for the environment and the local community as well as corporate profit generation into account.

Originality/value: It is the first study of this kind (on the Polish market at the least), examining the sustainable development approach in international projects, in the context of stakeholder outreach.

1. Introduction

Sustainability entails proper positioning of an organisation in economic reality, taking the social and economic challenges as well as the environmental opportunities and threats into account. The concept should therefore be seen as a potential for organisations that are aware of the importance of stakeholder relations. The building and nurturing of good environment relationships, based on engagement and dialogue, is crucial, as such relations not only allow for effective risk management, especially in the today's rapidly changing business environment, aptly described as the VUCA times (Mack et al., 2015), but also support the development of organisations, not only allowing their survival, but even achievement of competitive advantage.

Awareness of the fact that a company's activity affects the functioning of others makes responsible stakeholder cooperation an imperative that should thus be based on harmonious development of an organisation and its long-life cycle. Moreover, to maintain coherence between the various dimensions of business, a holistic approach to organisational management is required. This is because organisations are encompassed by people, communities, and other stakeholders, who are interested in interacting at different levels. Corporate responsibility is based on the interests and expectations of all the stakeholders of an organization.

The same is true for projects – sustainability is now a common approach, associated with the management of projects, programmes, institutions, organisations, people, and other entities requiring efficient and effective product and service development, manufacture, marketing, distribution, and delivery. In general, for projects to be sustainable, certain indicators and standards need to be established, from project identification, through feasibility studies, concept and activity design, assessment, financing, to implementation and evaluation. It is a proven truism that most projects fail due to the lack of an adequate sustainability plan. Therefore, a comprehensive analysis of a project's social, economic, legal, cultural, educational, and political environment is essential the course of its implementation. The role of stakeholders cannot be overlooked here, as their involvement facilitates the logistical preparations in a project (Morfaw, 2014). Such analysis, i.e., taking a project's philosophy, mission, vision, values, objectives and tasks into account, should be clearly articulated, as attention to accurate assessment of the beneficiaries, identification of the legal and regulatory frameworks, as well as marketing analysis, partnership development and institutional analysis, give room for effective and efficient project intention implementation.

2. Literature review

Many definitions of sustainability have emerged in recent years, of both academic and business background. Sustainability is defined as linkages to develop a common idea and better communication in the process of developing and transforming society's action for sustainable development (Glavič, Lukman, 2007, p. 1884). Long-term actions involve the use of the triple bottom line (TBL) model, which reflects the dimensions of sustainable development, namely the social, environmental, and economic aspects, encouraging commercial companies, NGOs and individuals to implement the idea of sustainable development. Considering the pillars of sustainable development, one might get an impression that the concept is not dissimilar to another well-established field, i.e., impact assessment. Nevertheless, impact assessment is a broader concept than TBL, especially in the context of social impact assessment. Vanclay (2004, p. 27) describes TBL as:

- social, environmental, and economic achievements,
- sustainable development, sustainable environment, sustainable communities,
- impact on the society, environment, and economic sustainability,
- economic, environmental, and social sustainability,
- economic prosperity, environmental quality, and social justice,
- economic growth, ecological balance, and social progress,
- economy, environment, equity,
- profit, people, planet (or planet, people, profit).

Depending on the context, sustainability has therefore implications for innovation per se, as well as for the processes and the organisational management style (Lang, Murphy, 2014). It is a goal in itself for many organisations, because it is the managers running organizations who are to build sustainability, not merely adopt it as a social goal (Jennings, Zandbergen, 1995).

Sustainable development is a systematic concept that refers to the continuity of economic, social, institutional, and environmental aspects of the human society and the non-human environment. It characterises a process or a state that can be maintained indefinitely at a certain level. In 1987, the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations defined sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". The definitions of sustainable development can vary, however, depending on the area of study or interaction and the context or the situation across many scales of space and time, from small to global production and consumption balance.

According to the *United Nations Environment Programme*, people form the social system, profit is linked to the economic system, while the planet is associated with the environmental system. This shows that sustainability is multi-stakeholder in nature. According to Achman

(2011), therefore, sustainability is not a top-down solution to balance the three elements, referred to as the 3Ps (Planet, People, Profit), but rather a consensus-based solution, where stakeholders are involved in the decision-making process.

The definition of sustainability evolves, influencing the politics, technology, and economics more intensively. Hence, there is an increasing need to involve more stakeholder groups in the development and management of the 3Ps (Mulder, 2006).

Whether dealing with an organisation or a project operation, as the business situation changes, the need to operate in a less secure (unpredictable) and more complex environment emerges, forcing managerial or project team members to plan their strategies, so as to meet the wide range of the demands in the internal and external environment. According to Thomas (1995), low manufacturing costs, high responsiveness and managerial flexibility are required not only for market expansion but also for economic sustainability. Sustainability is defined as the "ability to solve complex sustainability challenges in a profitable way, with rapidly evolving business innovations, applications, methods, products and processes, adapted to changing situations" (Dixon, Gorecki, 2010). As such, sustainability has been becoming an integral part of business strategy, delivering, through sustainable long-term decisions, shareholder value, in a responsible manner. Maintenance of both sustainability and agility, therefore, provides a potential for growth rather than, as some tend to simplify, achievement of actual growth and expansion.

3. The respective roles of stakeholders in an organisation and a project

Different interest groups can be identified in every organisation. The group that can or does influence the achievement of an organisation's goals (Freeman et al., 2010) are the stakeholders. Modern organisations, which are sustainability-oriented, should proactively manage the relations with all important stakeholders. Freeman specified that "[a] stakeholder in an organization is (by definition) any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1984), whereas R.K. Mitchell (1997) defined stakeholders as groups which influence an organisation's life. In this context, stakeholders can be considered random groups or individuals who may significantly influence or be influenced by an organisation (Evan, Freeman, 1988; Freeman et al, 2010; Donaldson, Preston, 1995; Greenley, Foxall, 1997).

This concept has been further expanded to include non-human stakeholders (Buchholz, 1993; Starik, 1995; Stead, Stead, 2000). A narrow definition of stakeholders refers to those distinguished by the way an organisation is managed, the role of stakeholders in the organisation, and the company's risk management (Barney, 1997; Clarkson, 1994; Greenley, Foxall, 1997; Harrison, St. John, 1996; Nasi et al., 1995). The objective of management is

usually to maximise the shareholder return (increase the organisation's value) in joint stock companies and corporations. It is also the main stakeholder objective (Shrivastava, 1995). The nature and the types of the relationships between organisations and the stakeholders involved have been discussed, inert alia, by Jones and Wicks (1999), Hill and Jones (1992).

Stakeholders thus include company owners, shareholders, the government and local administration, competitors, employees, volunteers, customers, schoolkids, suppliers, partners, labour unions, parent boards, analysts, global society, subcontractors, media, NGOs (non-profit organisations), local community, natural persons, insurers, banks, religious leaders, founders, beneficiaries etc. The list of stakeholders can vary, depending on an entity's industry, its development level, range, organisational culture, position, and its place in the supply chain and the organisation strategy. There are also the so-called silent stakeholders, such as the natural environment for example.

In a successful organisation (as well as in a well-managed project), the list of potential stakeholders should be constantly updated, as stakeholders are not given once and for all. Their interests and positions are subject to modification and change. It is also important to assess and prioritise them on this basis. The selection of key stakeholders should be initiated already at the level of objectives, in relation to the level of organisation/project development and the manner of objective achievement. K. Obłój (2007) defines stakeholders as "the institutions and organisations that fulfil two conditions: they are valuable to the organisation, participate in its decisions and effects, and are able to exert pressure on the organisation" [translated from the original in Polish by A.D.].

The following issues should be considered in stakeholder analysis:

- the stakeholders' power, understood as identification of the potential allies for the strategy implemented and the potential opponents who can influence strategic goal change and activity;
- stakeholder empowerment, meaning the process of providing the front-line stakeholders with authority to make the decisions once reserved for the organisation managers exclusively. It has become an important topic in social involvement and joint social projects;
- the urgency of stakeholder demand, which basically entails subjective assessment of stakeholder expectations, following a situation audit (Obłój, 2007).

Each stakeholder group is characterized by different needs, different life values, and different manner in which they affect the company. R. Mitchell et al. (1997) defined and listed seven main stakeholder groups, presented on Figure 1.
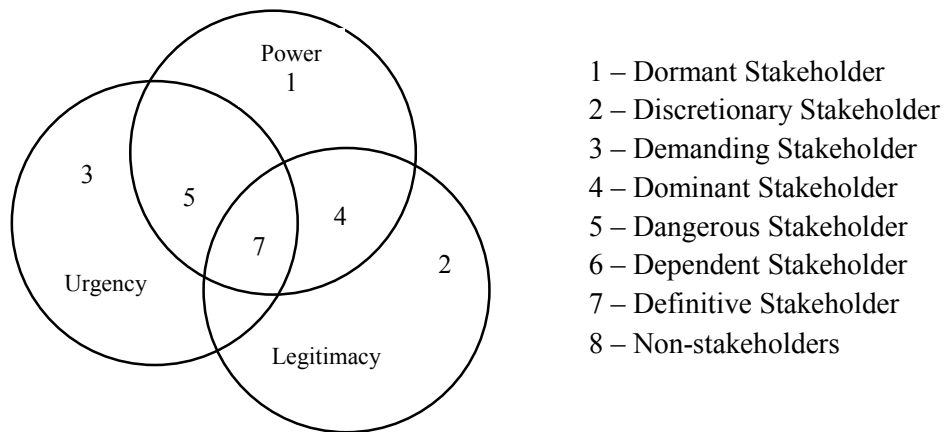
Figure 1. Stakeholder Classification: Salience model**.** Source: Mitchell, et al., 1997.

Mitchell et al. divided stakeholders into three groups, in distribution by stakeholder power, legitimacy, and stakeholder need urgency. A distinction can be made between silent stakeholders (whose behaviour and attitudes are not easy to identify and thus their value assessment poses difficulties), undefined stakeholders (whose behaviour can be inspiring for entrepreneurs), and strict stakeholders (who expect the highest quality relations). These three groups are also called 'invisible' stakeholders, since their role is secondary for an organisation.

The next three subgroups include: dominant stakeholders, who affect the decisions and business activities; dependent stakeholders, who are loyal to the company, but they pose a threat, as their actions can result in a loss of company value; and 'pending' stakeholders, who play a minor role with regard to the company. The stakeholders considered the most important are 'crucial' (final) stakeholders. The authors of this concept also identified the so-called non-stakeholders, who are neutral for the company.

In the age of enormous progress, digitisation, systematically improved communication, people exert huge influence on one another. Regardless of whether this influence is positive or negative, relationships are always formed. One might even say that these ties are a resource which, if skilfully managed, can constitute a significant competitive advantage. This resource can affect the financial strength and guarantee company growth and development (Jablonski, 2013). According to Savage et al. (1991), the process of stakeholder management needs to be improved by development of organisational relationships. This process consists of four stages:

- identification of all the stakeholders in an organisation,
- stakeholder diagnosis and classification, based on their priority to the organisation,
- development of strategies improving or changing the current relationships with key stakeholders,
- effective implementation of the strategies developed.

Depending on the relationship type, stakeholders should be defined as follows (Johnson, Scholes, 1999):

- positive – they contribute to the company's development (more or less) and its value,
- indifferent – have no influence on the organisation,
- negative – hostile, they put negative pressure on the organisation (e.g., competitors, who are or were related to the company, former dissatisfied employers, cooperants and suppliers). Influential institutions, dissatisfied with the cooperation with the company, can also be hostile stakeholders, who, through their own relations or via influence on the legal conditions, are able weaken a company's position or decrease its value.

Considering their role to the company, stakeholders can be divided into:

- first-order stakeholders (also called primary or priority stakeholders) – people, institutions and groups who cooperate directly with the company and impact its activity,
- second-order stakeholders (also called secondary stakeholders) - people, institutions and groups who do not have a direct impact on the organisation, but they are tightly connected with it,
- third-order stakeholders, the other persons involved, having indirect impact on the organisation, whose relations with the organisation are neither crucial nor necessary for effective company performance.

Having developed a list of stakeholders, based on Johnson and Scholes stakeholder mapping (1999), it is worth to consider:

- the degree of the stakeholders' interest in the organisation,
- the degree of the organisation's interest in the stakeholders,
- the stakeholders' impact on the organisation,
- the organisation's impact on the stakeholders.

According to these authors, high levels of influence and interest are reserved for the key stakeholders. Stakeholders with low influence and high interest should be merely informed about company activity. With regard to stakeholders characterized by high influence and low interest, organisations should use a tactic of constant contact and communication, in order to develop good stakeholder relationships. Low-impact, low-interest stakeholders expect minimal effort from the organisation and should thus be treated as such.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research background

The empirical part of this study is an excerpt from a report on stakeholder analysis under three international projects: SB WELL: Wellbeing Tourism in the South Baltic Region – Guidelines for good practices and Promotion[1]; and ArchaeoBalt: Laying fixed foundations for innovative archaeotourism – a new 'green' archaeoroute in the southern Baltic Sea region[2], both implemented in 2018-2021; as well as Cirtoinno: Circular economy tools to support innovation in green and blue tourism SMEs[3], implemented in 2016-2019. The projects were co-financed with EU funds, under the Interreg South Baltic Programme. The axis connecting the projects entailed a programme objective of more intensive development of the natural and cultural heritage sites in the South Baltic area to create sustainable tourism areas.

One of the elements embedded in the project implementation strategy involved identification and prioritisation of stakeholders, using the criterion of their importance and impact in selected phases of project implementation.

4.2. Description of the study

In order to collect data for the stakeholder analysis it was necessary to conduct a Focus Group Interview (FGI). The researchers' current experience indicates that inclusion of some (not all) stakeholders and identification of relations between them prevents projects from being implemented as intended.

The study was conducted in Gdańsk, from May to September 2021. Forty-eight participants took part in the focus groups – repressentatives of various companies, experienced in project management, possessing expert knowledge on the functioning of the tourism industry in the Pomeranian region. This ensured an appropriate level of substantive discussion and high quality of argumentation.

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[1] Project No. STHB.02.01.00-SE-0137/17. The project leader is Linnaeus University from Sweden, and the partners represent universities, authorities and tourism non-profit organisations from Poland, Lithuania, Germany, and Denmark. The project aims to increase public awareness about the concept of wellbeing and the possibilities of its use in the tourism sector as well as to promote the South Baltic Region as an attractive tourism destination.

[2] Project No. STHB.02.01.00-22-0138/17-00). The project leader is the University of Gdansk. Other partners are University of Aarhus and Lund University, Gdansk Museum and Bornholm Museum. The aim of the project is to create a tourism brand strategy for archaeotourism in the South Baltic region.

[3] Project No. STHB.01.02.00-22-0058/16-00. Pomerania Development Agency was the project leader. Other partners represent universities, offices and tourism non-profit organisations from Poland, Lithuania, and Denmark. The aim of the project was to increase innovation of tourism companies from the SME sector, to implement selected elements of closed-loop economy in services, products, and business models in the South Baltic area.

The research tool used entailed an interview scenario (survey questionnaire), which involved:

- analysis of the concept of 'stakeholders' and their classification,
- project data validation into database,
- stakeholder classification for selected international projects.

The interview participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire, the main purpose of which was to test their knowledge of the concept of 'stakeholder'. The following steps were suggested by the focus participants themselves and concerned:

1. identification of the stakeholders who, according to the respondents, are crucial for project success (the forms were filled in by each participant individually),
2. decision making on the stakeholder selection for the initial phase of the project,
3. specification of selected stakeholders' attitude to the solutions to be (or those which have been) developed as part of the project:
   - positive attitude (+),
   - negative attitude (-),
4. definition of the impact of the solutions developed as part of the project on the stakeholders identified:
   - positive influence (+),
   - negative influence (-).

The first part of the FGI aimed to verify how the concept of a 'stakeholder' is understood in international projects. In the course of the discussion, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The respondents define stakeholders as individuals/groups/institutions that benefit from the products developed under a project.
2. A need to classify stakeholders in terms of their involvement in different project life cycle phases exists (Mingus, 2002).
3. The lack of clear segmentation criteria results in important stakeholder group ignoring.
4. Project teams should view stakeholders from a broader perspective, including analysis of the scope and the direction of their relationship with the project.
5. Lack of sufficient awareness of the two-way relationship between the stakeholders and projects affects project success.
6. The respondents ignored the negative impact/influence on the stakeholders and projects (in both directions).

To continue the focus research, respondents were presented with a top-down definition of stakeholders provided by Donaldson and Preston (1995).

4.3. Characteristics and classification of stakeholders

The findings from the first part of the FGI, in particular those concerning the two-way relationship (impact/influence) between the stakeholders and projects and the project phase, allowed the facilitators to proceed to the next stage. The respondents were asked to:

- identify the stakeholders, in relation to the project life cycle phase,
- assess the stakeholders' influence on the project and the project's impact on the stakeholders, in positive or negative terms.

Table 1 shows the results of this stage of the survey.

Table 1.
Stakeholder analysis in selected projects

Phase		Stakeholders	Stakeholder influence on projects	Impact of projects on stakeholders
I.	Initial	Nearest neighbourhood	+	-
		Buyers of real estate in the neighbourhood	+	+
		Local authorities	+	+
		Regional authorities	+	+
		Developers	+	+
		Individual Opponents	-	No impact
		Tourism Industry (Large companies)	-	No impact
		Organisations promoting sustainable development and ecology	+	+
		Road and Greenery Administration	+	+
		Project Representatives	+	+
		Equipment Suppliers	+	+
		Universities	+	+
		Urban transport	No impact	-
		Green transport	+	+
		Competitors in the tourism industry not interested in implementing sustainable development	-	No impact
II.	Intermediate	Nearest neighbourhood	+	+
		Tourists	+	+
		Designers	+	+
		Competitors in the tourism industry not interested in implementing sustainable development	-	-
		Tourism Organisations	+	+
		Local Authorities	+	+
		Universities	+	+
		Tourism Industry (large companies)	-	-
III.	Implementation	Nearest neighbourhood	+	+
		Further surroundings (tourism industry in other regions)	+/-	+
		Urban transport	+	+/-
		Tourists	+	+
		Green transport	+	+
		Leisure centres	+	+
		Local Authorities	+	+
		Regional Authorities	+	+

Legend: influence: (+) positive, (-) negative.

Source: own study and elaboration.

It is worth noting that the respondents identified stakeholders only through the lens of direct benefits or in the light of possible/negative direct barriers (despite the definition presented to them). This shows how wide the gap between the theory and practice is.

The aim of the next stage was to select and assess the stakeholders. Stakeholder attitude was assessed using an 11-point scale (from -5 to +5), where +5 indicated a strongly positive stakeholder attitude towards a given project and -5 indicated a strongly negative attitude. Stakeholder importance was assessed using a scale from 0 to 5. As mentioned, in this case, stakeholder importance referred to the stakeholder's ability to influence a given project. According to Mitchell (1997), this means stakeholder 'strength', while Lindenberg (1981) defines it as stakeholder 'influence'. The third criterion remained unchanged. The impact of a given project on a stakeholder was assessed in a similar way, so that +5 was defined as a strong positive impact, while -5 was defined as a strong negative impact of a given project on a stakeholder. The average scores calculated based on the survey forms are shown in Table 2 (responses of 'none' and '+/-' were not included in the calculations).

Table 2.
Impact and importance of stakeholders in the final phase of selected projects

Stakeholders	Stakeholder influence on projects		Impact of projects on stakeholders*
	Stakeholder attitude to projects*	Scale**	
Nearest neighbourhood	+4.00	3.50	+3.80
Further surroundings	+4.30	4.70	+1.60
Local authorities	+3.80	4.20	+4.60
Regional authorities	+3.40	3.80	+3.40
Business institutions	+4.20	4.50	+3.63
Investors	+1.20	3.00	+1.50
Designers	+1.60	3.70	+2.50
Organisations promoting sustainable development and ecology	+4.00	3.60	+3.70
Universities	+4.70	4.00	+3.50
Tourism organisations	+4.80	+1.23	4.70
Media	+2.60	+2.00	2.50

Legend: * Scale from -5 to +5, ** Scale from 0 to 5.

Source: own study and elaboration.

4.4. Mapping of stakeholder priorities

Three attributes (impact, attitude towards a project, importance) have placed the stakeholders on the so-called stakeholder map. The impact of a given project on a stakeholder is presented on the vertical axis, with a scale ranging from -5 to +5. The stakeholder attitude to a given project is presented on the horizontal axis, with a scale ranging from -5 to +5. The sphere size indicates each stakeholder's importance. All the study participants positively rated the stakeholder attitude towards the project and the project's impact on each stakeholder. All the results are therefore placed in the upper right corner of the map, as shown in Figure 2.
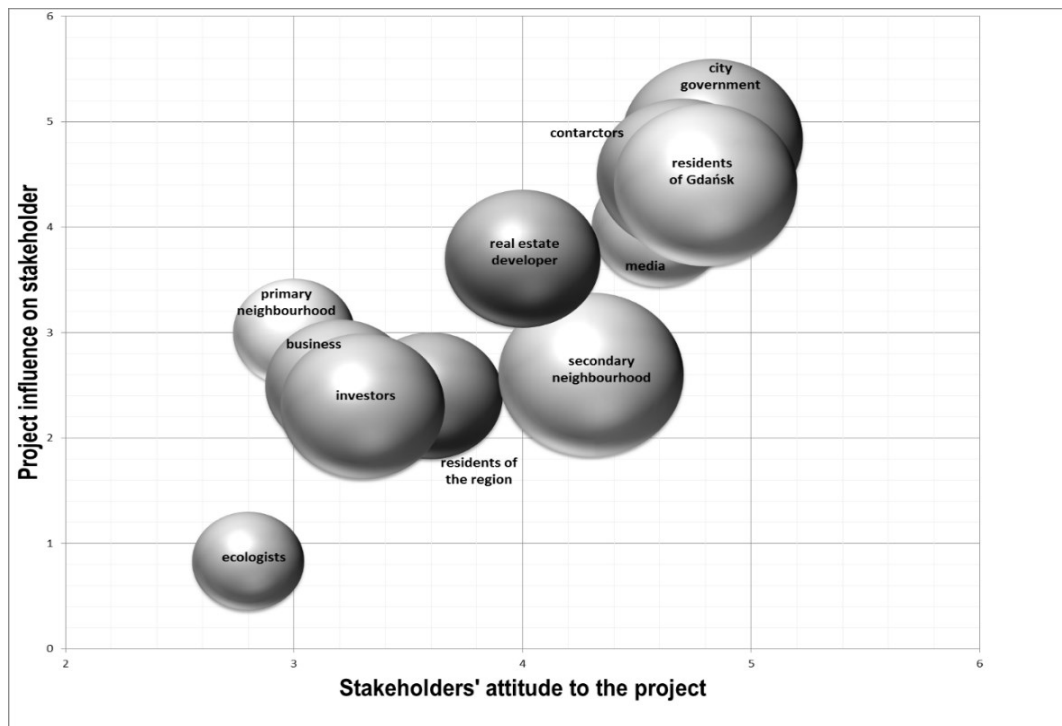
Figure 2. Stakeholder perception map for a railway project in its final phase. Source: own study.

It is worth noting that all stakeholders were described as characterized by positive attitude to the project. At the same time, the project was rated as having a more or less positive impact on the stakeholders defined in the course of the study.

5. Discussion

The topic of discussion is to clarify the specific role of projects promoting sustainable development. This is because the article emphasises the application of sustainability policies to the project management process itself. However, despite emphasising that in the three selected projects the primary objective was to educate and promote the tourism industry on sustainable development, there was no analysis of how effective stakeholder assessment affects the project. It is therefore worth discussing this topic in future research.

However, returning to the projects in question, it should be noted that despite the understanding of the importance of sustainable development actions, the environment is aware of the fact that projects have specific duration (in this case 3 years of implementation and 5 years of sustainability). The decisive role here thus lies with the project leaders, who should be able to convince the environment to support projects that are to end in the near future. This awareness was defined as a key factor of project success.

The results obtained during the focus group research indicate positive relations between projects (regardless of their nature) and their stakeholders. The positive dimension of these relationships is the result of a focus on sustainability, where its three pillars – planet, people, and profits for the organisation – are considered at every stage of the project.

This fact was repeatedly stressed in this study. The respondents, who took part in the focus study, saw positive relations with stakeholders as the source of success of each project.

It would be worthwhile, once the pandemic has subsided (and this is the authors' intention), to conduct a similar focus study in the other countries where projects have been and are being implemented. It would then be worth comparing the results, in terms of impact and strength, and the types of stakeholders in the projects.

The authors also intend to extend the survey to identify barriers that hinder cooperation between stakeholders and different actors in projects. This will tie the whole study together and make it complete.

6. Summary

An effective management policy for projects based on sustainability is founded, among other things, on an intentional stakeholder analysis. It should be adapted not only to the environmental conditions and stakeholder expectations (in the case of the projects concerned, they are the owners and managers of the tourist facilities), but also to the needs of the social groups that are to varying degrees involved in the activities undertaken as part of a given project.

The importance of identifying and managing stakeholder relations is determined by the research findings presented in this paper, have unambiguously proved that an effective policy in terms of sustainable development activity should be based on intensive actions directed at stakeholders.

This effectiveness is determined, in the opinion of the respondents, by proper and comprehensive stakeholder identification, which is of key importance to the success of any investment. Since the stakeholders had been identified and prioritised at the planning stage, a strategy based on sustainable development was created as a consequence. Its success has been evidenced by, inter alia, the attention focused on all the stakeholder groups, with proper priority given to selected stakeholder groups, the taking of remedial action in the case of potentially unfavourable stakeholder behaviour, and the effective use of the activities that contribute to the investment implementation, including the transparency of all project activities and the open communication between the project partners, managers, and the ultimate project users.

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