RETHINKING STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION AND CLASSIFICATION: A LITERATURE-BASED REVIEW ON EVOLVING ROLES AND INFLUENCE

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ABSTRACT

This desktop review explores the evolving landscape of stakeholder identification and classification, focusing on the growing significance of social and environmental stakeholders in corporate strategy and sustainability. Traditionally, businesses prioritised profit maximisation for shareholders; however, contemporary thought particularly stakeholder theory—recognises the broader spectrum of individuals and groups affected by or capable of influencing business activities. Drawing exclusively from existing literature, the paper analyses key stakeholder categories primary, secondary, negligible, qualified claimants using attributes such as power, legitimacy, and urgency. It also delves into the dynamic role of NGOs, CBOs, the media, and regulatory authorities in shaping business practices. South African case examples, such as the #FeesMustFall campaign and Marikana protests, highlight the high cost of neglecting stakeholder engagement. The review concludes that inadequate recognition of all stakeholder groups, particularly those traditionally deemed "negligible," can result in substantial operational, reputational, and financial costs. Effective stakeholder engagement, therefore, requires inclusive, continuous, and strategic interaction, particularly within socially and environmentally sensitive contexts.

Keywords: Stakeholder Classification, Stakeholder Engagement, Primary And Secondary Stakeholders, Social And Environmental Stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stakeholders are no longer viewed merely as shareholders or investors in modern business environments. Over time, the definition has evolved to include a wide range of individuals, communities, and institutions that either influence or are influenced by a company's activities. Freeman's stakeholder theory and subsequent refinements by other scholars have underscored the strategic importance of recognising and managing diverse stakeholder interests for long-term sustainability.

This literature review provides a comprehensive examination of various approaches to stakeholder identification and classification, drawing upon notable contributions from Freeman, Tullberg, Fassin, and others. The review critiques traditional binary classifications (primary vs. secondary) and explores more nuanced typologies that incorporate power dynamics, legitimacy, urgency, and stakeholder roles in relation to corporate actions. Particular attention is given to social and environmental stakeholders—often classified as "negligible"—and how their underestimated influence has led to serious organisational consequences.

In the South African context, events such as the #FeesMustFall movement and Marikana tragedy illustrate how neglecting stakeholder concerns can escalate into crises. These cases provide valuable insights into the cost of superficial engagement and the necessity for companies to adopt meaningful and strategic stakeholder management practices, especially in socially sensitive environments.

2. LITERAURE REVIEW

Corporate Accountability

Stakeholders are an integral part of any business organisation. "Before the twentieth century, companies assumed that the key objective of business is maximisation of profit for the investor, and management was only accountable to investors or shareholders. The assumption and approach have long been discovered to not bring sustainable development hence, the involvement of all stakeholders" (Freeman, 2010:9). Stakeholders have been defined as "individuals and groups which can affect the company's performance or who are affected by a firm's actions" (Freeman & Reeds, 1983:89) as supported by Freeman (2010:9) and Fisher (2019:279). In the GRI (2013), stakeholders are defined as "entities or individuals that significantly affect or are affected by the organisation's activities, products and services and whose actions result in the organisation failing to successfully implement its business strategies and achieve its objectives". Stakeholders can be entities or individuals who have the rights under law or moral rights that provide them with legitimate claims upon the organisation. "Stakeholders can include those who are invested in the organisation (such as employees, shareholders, suppliers) and have contractual agreements as well as those who have other relationships with the organisation [such as vulnerable groups within local communities and civil society" (GRI, 2013). The groupings are presented below.

2.1.1 Identification and classification of stakeholders based on relationships

Lindblom and Ohlsson (2011:5) classify stakeholders into primary and secondary stakeholder groups. Lindblom and Ohlsson further defines primary stakeholders as "those that a company has made a contractual relationship with, for example, employees, suppliers, and governments". "These groups have a direct influence on managerial decisions" (Benn et al., 2016:2). A primary stakeholder is one whose continued participation is essential to the corporation's survival (Hult, Mena, Ferrell & Ferrell, 2011:49; Fassin, 2012:84). "Due to a contractual agreement that exists between primary stakeholders and the company, no company can survive without primary stakeholders, and it is worthy to identify each stakeholder's interest so that the best value can be given to improve and maintain the reciprocal relationship" Fassin (2012:84). "Secondary stakeholders are not engaged in transactions with the company and are supposedly not essential for its survival" (Lindblom and Ohlsson, 2011:5). Fassin (2012:83) states that "little has been written about reciprocity in secondary stakeholder relationships as previously, this group had been classified as a group that wants to reap where it had not sown until recently when companies accepted that if secondary stakeholders are not managed effectively, they could be costly to the company". Secondary stakeholders are not engaged in transactions with the company, and Fassin (2012:84) describes them as "not essential for company survival".

This has been refuted by Tullberg (2013:131) who expounds that neglecting this group of stakeholders is just the same as neglecting the internal or primary stakeholders. Instead, Tullberg (2013:131) suggests that "stakeholders be classified according to attributes as follows".

2.1.2 Identification and classification of stakeholders based on their attributes

Tullberg (2013:128) suggests that stakeholders should be classified according to the type of influence and the strength of that influence toward management decisions. In the same vein, Szwajkowski (2000:382) explains that "the strength of influence is situational and that each scenario positions stakeholders according to the level of impact they will have if their demands are not met". Tullberg (2013:128) classifies stakeholders into two classes, namely, "the influence group or the qualified claimant group, and less powerful group". He continues to explain that "the qualified claimant group comprises important stakeholders who can exert much pressure on the company even though some of them may not have any legal connection with the company".

Tullberg's (2013:128) study is supported by Benn et al. (2016:2) who propound that "the qualified claimant group can cause the company to consider what it initially had rejected". According to Tullberg's (2013:128), "this group includes those that can exert pressure upon the company on behalf of another group, for example, the media and NGOs". In support, Benn et al., (2016:3) posit that "these groups have influential power over the company and can upset operations to a point where legitimate claims would be disregarded". The second class, the less powerful group, is vulnerable to company actions and according to (Tullberg, 2013:129), "it has no leverage over the company's actions and can do little to change decisions made". If the less powerful groups get support from the media, they become powerful. Tullberg (2013:129) posits that "almost everyone can be indirectly affected by a company but considers this effect as insufficient for one to be classified in any group of stakeholders, especially if the individual or group is not contributing to or has a role in the company".

Crane and Ruebottom's (2011:79) classification is developed from reviewing Mitchell Agle and Wood's (1997); and Clarkson's (1995) research where they identify stakeholders' "basing on power, legitimacy, and urgency". In the power attribute, Crane and Ruebottom (2011:81) explain that "the stakeholder who has a power relationship causes the company to do what it did not initially want to do". Crane and Ruebottom (2011:81) further explain that "a stakeholder may not possess that power all the time as some conditions can affect the degree of power a stakeholder may have over the company at some point in time". For example, the media may have more power to influence a certain group of stakeholders if a company has a culture of using a reactive approach compared to one that uses a proactive approach. Certain prevailing conditions may dilute the power. "If the stakeholder has a legal, financial or moral right to claim but cannot enforce the claim, then the stakeholder has no power and, therefore, no legitimacy" (Benn et al., 2016:3). They can only have their interests addressed in a case where the concerns and interests have become valuable to the company or when the interests have to be prioritised because the company must achieve certain goals. "If stakeholders have the power to distract company operations, their claim becomes urgent" (Szwajkowski, 2000:382).

Urgency, as defined by Neville et al. (2011:358), "is not an attribute of stakeholders but a condition of the claim whereby stakeholders' concerns, inputs or interests are prioritised". Parmar et al. (2010:405) suggest a systematic way of analysing stakeholders. "This analysis will identify material interests of stakeholders" (Parmar, et al., 2010:405). Soriano et al. (2012:1863); Hult et al. (2011:50); and Parmar, et al. (2010:405) categorise stakeholders into classes by means of stakeholder analysis. "The classes recognise key stakeholders as those that contribute some input to the company in a contractual agreement, and they become part of its output – thereby creating a reciprocal link with the company" (Soriano et al., 2012:1863). The company cannot survive without them. Customers, suppliers, employees, and shareholders fall into this category. "The second class is for negligible stakeholders that are non-influential or the inoffensive" (Hult et al., 2011:50). "Civil society holds as much as 65% of the world's land but are the most vulnerable and negligible group" according to Hillenbrand, Money & Ghobadian (2013:140). It is negligible because of the level of knowledge it has, yet it is the most affected by the company's actions.

To give an example, in 2015, in South Africa, negligible stakeholders in public establishments became costly when emotions rose up and resulted in a "#fees must fall" campaign. In South Africa, higher education students' grievances were not given attention until 2015 up to 2016 (Chabalala, 2017). "The South African Higher Education authority delayed finding a solution to the students' "# FEES MUST FALL CAMPAIGN" until vandalism costs accumulated to levels high enough to provide free higher education to about

3 000 poor students for the whole year" (Chabalala, 2017). The students were negligible stakeholders for all these past years until they decided to take up arms with the government. Negligible stakeholders can be costly if not managed correctly as indicated in Table 1

Table 1
ESTIMATED COSTS OF DAMAGES FROM NEGLIGIBLE STAKEHOLDERS

Institution	Estimated cost of damage
University of Stellenbosch	R 352 000.00
North-West University	R 612 000.00
University of Limpopo	R 1 786 294.52
University of Johannesburg	R 345 000.00
University of the Western Cape	R 46 544 446.00
Walter Sisulu University	R 351 287.19
Tshwane University of Technology	R 5 073 747.73

University of KwaZulu-Natal	R 82 000 000.00
Cape Peninsula University of Technology	R 689 850.14
University of Cape Town	R 1 415 693.14
University of Zululand	R 4 500 000.00
Rhodes University	R 250 000.00
University of Witwatersrand	R 1 410 223.00
Total	**R 145 330 541.72**

***Source**: Department of Higher Education (2017:24)*

The Department of Higher Education (2017:24) indicated that "these costs exclude costs that were yet to be established on the recurrence of the same campaign in October 2016 to January 2017". Delaying addressing stakeholder concerns has become costly. Boycotts and strikes reflect badly on the efficiency of top management in managing stakeholder interests and concerns. Natifu and Zikusooka (2011:215), in a media article, "Students should be consulted before university fee increment"', outlined the importance of stakeholder engagement and cited a Makerere University strike that emanated from an announcement about fees increase. "Negligible stakeholders may not be as negligible", as Hult et al. (2011:50) and Parmar et al. (2010:405) assume.

2.1.3 Identification of social and environmental stakeholders based on roles

It is crucial to understand the role of social and environmental stakeholders and the kind of pressures that are exerted on companies to comply and improve social and environmental performance. Baranova and Meadows (2017:118) allude that studies that explore the role taken by stakeholders in influencing companies' environmental strategies appear to identify pressure as the key issue. It is widely accepted that companies are facing pressure from all but mostly social and environmental stakeholders (Ramanathan, Poomkaew & Nath, 2014:171). Social and environmental stakeholders, in this study, and according to Banorova and Meadows (2017:115), are stakeholders whose main mission is to care for the community and the planet; failure of which will result in poor living conditions and depletion in natural resources. Social and environmental stakeholders view companies as the major culprits of social and environmental deterioration, yet Friedman (1972:1) believes that companies are not socially and environmentally responsible. However, companies draw resources from the environment and, therefore, should be held accountable for the effects resulting from operational activities. This reluctance by companies to accept responsibility has initiated social and environmental stakeholders as watch dogs of companies. Social and environmental stakeholders are not classified in one category because they are established to fulfil other purposes besides watching companies. To this note, Baranova and Meadows (2017:116) argue that "it is time to re-consider the groupings of social and environmental stakeholders that are in existence".

The existing literature places social and environmental stakeholders at the periphery, classifying them as negligible stakeholders (Ramanathan et al., 2014:172) but companies are now realising the economic impact emanating from social and environmental stakeholders' strikes, protests, and property vandalism. According to Stocker et al. (2020:9), companies are beginning to group social and environmental stakeholders as primary stakeholders. Some of the groupings are explained in sections 2.5.3.1 and 2.5.3.2.

2.1.3.1 Social and environmental stakeholders (NGOs, CBOs, and media)

Social and environmental stakeholders include but are not limited to organisations that are separate from the legislative, administrative, and judicial power of the state. Non- governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisation (CBOs), and the media adhere to rules of conduct and distinctive customs that enhance fulfilment of the mandate (Weaver, O'Keeffe, Hamer & Palmer, 2019:18). "Examples of such organisations are labour unions, religious groups, cultural and educational associations, sport clubs, student groups, political parties and ethnic groups, and pressure groups" (Palmer, 2019:18) According to Weaver et al. (2019:18) non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) are intermediaries between civil society and the state or between civil society and companies, whose role is to understand local realities and enhance power and legitimacy of societal voices. Leonard (2014); Banorova and Meadows (2017); and Matebesi and Marais (2018) conducted research on roles of NGOs and CBOs in South Africa of which the findings are outlined below.

i. Leonard (2014:371); Banorova and Meadows (2017:116) allude that in South Africa, the well-established NGOS have developed a collaborative relationship with the government, subcontracted to work as partners in addressing legacies of the past. This can be interpreted to mean that the government has captured the NGOS to an extent where NGOs can no longer hold the government accountable.
ii. Weaver et al. (2019:18) support Banorova and Meadows (2017:116) and Leonard (2014:371), that long-established NGOs and CBOs have shifted from the role of being a watchdog, of effectively engaging with the government for the benefit of the poor communities, into integrating with the government.
iii. The case being so, pressure groups have illegally sprouted to take over the mandate of the long-established NGOs. However, Weaver et al. (2019:19) posit that in practice, the pressure groups rarely have an impact on policy makers and political authorities due to lack of funding and capacity to engage meaningfully.
iv. In this same vein, Matebesi and Marais (2018:373) outline that NGOs and CBOs, through community trusts and traditional leaders, do not give pressure to the government only but also to companies. In the same regard, Matebesi and Marais (2018:373) postulate that CBOs, together with the community trusts and community leaders, have been captured by companies and are now advancing their own goals at the expense of the community.
v. A conclusion can be made that pressure groups are now posing as NGOs that represent the societal voice. The government does not seem to fund pressure groups, and their concerns and petitions are not making any impact.

Nevertheless, according to Asuelime (2017:52) the Government of South Africa has enacted policies that aim to protect historically disadvantaged and vulnerable communities. This literature is important in establishing the current practices on the roles that social and environmental stakeholders are assuming.

2.2 Government and other regulators

Government and industrial regulators are social and environmental stakeholders since industrial boards, local and national government exert pressure or control companies using laws, codes, and regulations. Ramanathan et al. (2014:172) outline that pressure from regulatory stakeholders through changes in regulation and regulatory changes, non- compliance penalties, and product elimination affect, directly or indirectly, a company 's decision making process. Regulatory control results in some companies devoting more resources to social and environmental management. The Companies Act 71 of 2008 does not compel companies to engage in CSR activities. However, Goldengate Handbook (2012:9); along with Weaver et al. (2019:16) allude that in South Africa, government policies and King IV (2016: Part 5.4-principle 14.29b) address the need for companies to consider stakeholders and also to adopt the triple bottom line approach. The triple bottom line approach asserts that management should develop strategies that incorporate social, environmental, and economic goals to care for people and plants in the process of seeking profit. For JSE-listed companies, compliance with King IV (2016) is a mandatory listing requirement. Besides complying to King IV (2016), companies are expected to comply to the BBBEE Act 46 of 2013, to give procurement preference to historically disadvantaged members of society who are economically active (BBBEE Act 46, 2013:37271). In conclusion, the above statement generates arguments on whether companies engage stakeholders' voluntarily or forcibly. Mandatory regulations have been known to push companies towards artificial compliance (Chen, Hung & Wang, 2018:169)

2.3 Stakeholder engagement

"Effective engagement is characterised by dialogue, a two-way process where stakeholders are not merely consulted or listened to, but where a company makes a sincere attempt to respond to stakeholder concerns" according to Rossouw (2015) and supported by Aina (2019:60). Responding to stakeholder concerns builds trust, and experience shows that trust and relationships take time to build but are valuable assets. To build trust, the company must show that it has listened and acted in response to stakeholder concerns. This is why ongoing communication with, and reporting to, stakeholders is such an important component in any engagement strategy. Haq (2012:89) posits that "discussions with major stockowners and stakeholders help a company to understand how it is viewed".

Engagements with other stakeholders can be crucial in helping companies understand what society expects. William, Janvrin, Perkins and Raschke (2016:248) outline that "each type of stakeholder group has its own interests in the company, but there are multiple and common interests that join stakeholders or sub-groups of stakeholders together at some point". For instance, employees and civil society are likely to be interested in environmental safety and better living and working conditions.

Rossouw (2015) posited that "environmental organisations are likely to be interested in the civil society's safety from the output that comes from the input of nature as environmental organisations are more concerned with companies' relationships with the natural environment". Rossouw is supported by Benn et al., (2016:3). "Investment in society and the environment is not only confined to charitable acts and philanthropy; it also involves providing ethical products that bring sustainable life" (William et al., 2016:249). "Many businesses pursue CSR activities that can best be termed pet projects, as they reflect the personal interests of individual senior executives" (William et al., 2016:249). While these activities may be presented with much noise and fanfare, they usually offer minimal benefits to either business or society. They are therefore merely brilliant publicity stunts. "In the middle are efforts that can make both sides feel good but generate limited and often one-sided benefits" according to Maignan, Ferrell & Hult (1999;456). With philanthropy, for instance, corporate donations deliver the majority of benefits on society (with markedly great potential to resolve society's challenges but often questionably low reputational benefits accruing to the business).

William et al., (2016:251) postulates that "similarly, in what is best referred to as propaganda, CSR activities are focused primarily on building a company's reputation, with little real benefit to society." Cynicism around these activities purports that this form of CSR is, at best, a type of ads marketing campaign and publicity stunt and is potentially detrimental if it exposes a gap between the company's words and actions which is highly probable if not inevitable. In support, Kolk (2010:371) assert that "having a positive impact on societal issues such as improving living standards is not a quick fix project".

Companies that want topartner need to have a long-term mind-set backed up by solid promises and measurable commitments and actions. Their initiatives must demonstrate added value to both shareholders and stakeholders over time.

This study focuses on the strides made so far by publicly listed companies in South Africa to create shared value through consultation, involvement or participation of social and environmental stakeholders in the design and processes of a business strategy. "There is growing dissatisfaction by stakeholders around the world at being inadequately engaged in processes and decisions that affect their biophysical, social, cultural, and economic environment" (Fassin, 2012:88). "This dissatisfaction is reflected, for example, in protests such as those that took place in Marikana in 2012 where 34 employees lost their lives due to a lack of effective stakeholder engagement" (Drake, 2013).

An increasing number of cases are being taken to court because the concerns of interested and affected parties have not been adequately taken into consideration in the decision- making process. Opportunities for stakeholder engagement have, however, been increased by democratic governance, the increasing degree of decentralisation in decision-making and the growing influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and the private sector. Poorly run stakeholder engagement processes have led to a large degree of criticism by Interested and Affected Stakeholders (IASs) and environmental consultants.

3. CONCLUSION

This literature-based study concludes that the traditional stakeholder classifications are increasingly insufficient in capturing the complexities of modern corporate environments. As evidenced in the South African context, disregarding the concerns of so-called negligible stakeholders can result in significant reputational, financial, and operational risks. Effective stakeholder management must therefore extend beyond formal contractual relationships to encompass a broader, more inclusive approach rooted in power dynamics, legitimacy, urgency, and evolving societal roles. Businesses aiming for long-term sustainability must reframe their stakeholder engagement strategies to ensure active, responsive, and value-driven partnerships with all affected parties.

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