

Stakeholder Engagement and Performance of Early Childhood Development Project Implemented by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District, Rwanda

Mukaruzima Jeannette¹, Dr. Martin Kimemia Gathiru, PhD²

^{1,2} Department, Science in Project Management, Mount Kigali University

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Abstract: This study examined the influence of stakeholder engagement on the performance of Early Childhood Development (ECD) projects implemented by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District, Rwanda. Specifically, it assessed the effects of communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities on project performance. Guided by Systems Theory and Stakeholder Theory, the study adopted a descriptive research design and a mixed-methods approach. A sample of 133 respondents was drawn from a target population of 199 project officers, local leaders, and beneficiaries using simple random and purposive sampling techniques. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analysis with MS Excel and SPSS, while qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

The findings revealed that all three dimensions of stakeholder engagement significantly influenced ECD project performance. Communication mechanisms demonstrated a strong positive relationship with project performance ($r = 0.880$, $\beta = 0.901$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, stakeholder capacity exhibited a strong positive effect ($r = 0.901$, $\beta = 0.901$, $p < 0.001$), while participation opportunities showed the strongest positive relationship ($r = 0.929$, $\beta = 0.773$, $p < 0.001$). The regression model ($R = 0.931$, $R^2 = 0.866$) indicated that stakeholder engagement variables jointly explained 86.6% of the variation in ECD project performance. The study concludes that stakeholder engagement is a critical determinant of ECD project performance. Effective communication enhances coordination, transparency, and trust among stakeholders; capacity building improves stakeholders' knowledge and competencies for effective project implementation; and inclusive participation fosters ownership, accountability, and long-term project sustainability. The study recommends that Solace Ministries and similar organizations institutionalize structured communication systems, continuous stakeholder capacity-building programs, and inclusive participation mechanisms throughout the project cycle. Policymakers should integrate stakeholder engagement standards into ECD and community development policies to strengthen project effectiveness and sustainability. Future research should examine the moderating effects of factors such as leadership, organizational culture, and resource availability, and employ comparative or longitudinal designs to validate these findings across different organizational and geographical contexts.

Keywords: Stakeholder Engagement, Early Childhood, Project, Solace Ministries, Gasabo District.

1. INTRODUCTION

Stakeholder engagement has become a fundamental determinant of project performance across diverse sectors worldwide. According to the Project Management Institute (2021), organizations with high levels of stakeholder engagement achieve a project success rate of 71%, compared to only 48% among organizations with low stakeholder engagement. Based on surveys involving more than 3,000 project professionals across North America, Europe, and Asia, the report demonstrates that systematic stakeholder identification, effective communication, and continuous involvement throughout the project

lifecycle significantly improve project timeliness, budget compliance, quality of deliverables, and overall organizational performance. These findings underscore the growing international recognition that participatory approaches are essential for successful project implementation.

Empirical evidence from different regions further confirms the importance of stakeholder engagement in improving project outcomes. In Brazil, Pacagnella, Porto, Pacífico, and Salgado (2020) employed a qualitative case study at the Brazilian Science Park and found that structured stakeholder engagement through stakeholder mapping, collaborative communication channels, and capability integration enhanced project legitimacy, facilitated resource mobilization, and strengthened alignment between project objectives and stakeholder expectations. Likewise, Alamoudi, Abidoeye, and Lam (2023), using regression analysis on global smart city projects, established that regulatory clarity, collaborative governance, and continuous stakeholder interaction significantly increased citizen participation and project effectiveness. These studies demonstrate that early, structured, and continuous stakeholder engagement contributes substantially to project success.

Similar findings have been reported in infrastructure and construction projects. Bal (2020), combining interviews with 16 construction professionals and survey data from 233 United Kingdom construction firms, found that early stakeholder involvement, regular feedback mechanisms, and collaborative decision-making significantly enhanced both sustainability and project performance. Likewise, Zhang and Liu (2022), in a study of Chinese smart city initiatives, reported that participatory planning increased stakeholder satisfaction by 38% while reducing project disputes by 21%. In South Africa, Xegwana, Herron, and Nyika (2023) found that ineffective communication weakened stakeholder trust and commitment, leading to poor project performance. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that effective communication, inclusive participation, and collaborative decision-making are indispensable for successful project delivery.

Evidence from Africa similarly highlights the importance of stakeholder engagement in enhancing project performance. In Kenya, Maina and Kimutai (2020) surveyed 213 respondents involved in open-air market projects and found that stakeholder identification, effective communication, and active participation each had statistically significant positive effects on project performance. Similarly, Ekung, Okonkwo, and Odesola (2020), studying construction projects in Nigeria, concluded that proactive stakeholder engagement reduced conflicts, minimized community resistance, and improved project implementation by aligning regulatory requirements with stakeholder expectations. These findings suggest that continuous communication and meaningful stakeholder participation are particularly important in resource-constrained and socially diverse environments.

Within Rwanda, growing empirical evidence supports the positive relationship between stakeholder engagement and project performance. Mukakarisa and Njoroge (2024) reported that stakeholder engagement during project planning ($\beta = 0.325$), implementation ($\beta = 0.268$), and monitoring ($\beta = 0.409$) significantly improved construction project performance. Similarly, Ngwabije and Gitahi (2023) found that stakeholder participation in planning, implementation, and decision-making enhanced project efficiency, sustainability, and achievement of project objectives. Mukamana and Kalimba (2023) further established that stakeholder participation in project identification ($\beta = 0.144$), planning ($\beta = 0.391$), monitoring ($\beta = 0.341$), and resource mobilization ($\beta = 0.199$) significantly improved project performance. Together, these studies demonstrate that stakeholder engagement positively influences project quality, cost efficiency, timely completion, and long-term sustainability within the Rwandan context.

In the Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector, stakeholder engagement is particularly important because project success depends on coordinated efforts among government institutions, development partners, local authorities, caregivers, community organizations, and beneficiaries. The Government of Rwanda has prioritized ECD as a key strategy for promoting child health, nutrition, education, and holistic development, with implementation supported by development partners, including Solace Ministries in Gasabo District. Despite substantial investments, implementation reports continue to identify challenges related to limited stakeholder participation, ineffective communication mechanisms, and inadequate stakeholder capacity-building, all of which constrain project effectiveness and sustainability (New Times, 2024).

Although previous studies in Rwanda have extensively examined stakeholder engagement within construction, infrastructure, and community development projects, little empirical evidence exists regarding how stakeholder engagement influences the performance of Early Childhood Development projects. Moreover, existing studies have largely examined stakeholder engagement as a single construct without specifically investigating the contribution of communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities within the unique multi-stakeholder environment of ECD programmes. This knowledge gap limits the development of evidence-based strategies for strengthening stakeholder collaboration in child development interventions. Therefore, this study examined the influence of communication

mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities on the performance of Early Childhood Development projects implemented by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District, Rwanda, during the period 2022–2024. The findings are expected to provide practical recommendations for improving stakeholder engagement, project effectiveness, and the long-term sustainability of ECD interventions in Rwanda and comparable settings.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive research design, which is appropriate for systematically describing the characteristics, perceptions, and experiences of stakeholders involved in the ECD project by Solace Ministries.

2.2 Research Setting

This study was conducted in the Gasabo district, one of the three districts that make up the City of Kigali.

2.3 Target Population

The target population for this study comprised all stakeholders involved in the implementation of the ECD projects by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District between 2022 and 2024.

2.4 Sample Size

To determine the appropriate sample size from the target population of 199 direct stakeholders, Slovin's formula was used. According to Kothari (2014), Slovin's formula is a practical method for calculating sample size when the total population is known and a specific margin of error is acceptable. The formula is:

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

- **n** = Sample size
- **N** = Total population (199)
- **e** = Margin of error (0.05)

By substituting the values into the formula, $n = \frac{199}{1 + 199(0.05)^2} = \frac{199}{1 + 0.4925} = \frac{199}{1.4925} = 133$

Therefore, the determined sample size became 133 respondents. This size was statistically sufficient to yield reliable and generalizable results within the specified confidence interval. It has balanced the need for robust data while maintaining feasibility regarding time and resources required for data collection.

2.5 Sampling Technique

The study adopted a combination of stratified random sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling to ensure adequate representation and relevance across stakeholder categories.

2.6 Data Collection Instruments

This study used three primary instruments for data collection: a structured questionnaire, an interview guide, and a document review checklist.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Demographic characteristics of respondents

Understanding the demographic characteristics of respondents is essential in interpreting their views and the overall reliability of the research data. This section presents respondents' gender, age, education level, role in the ECD project, and activities they were involved in.

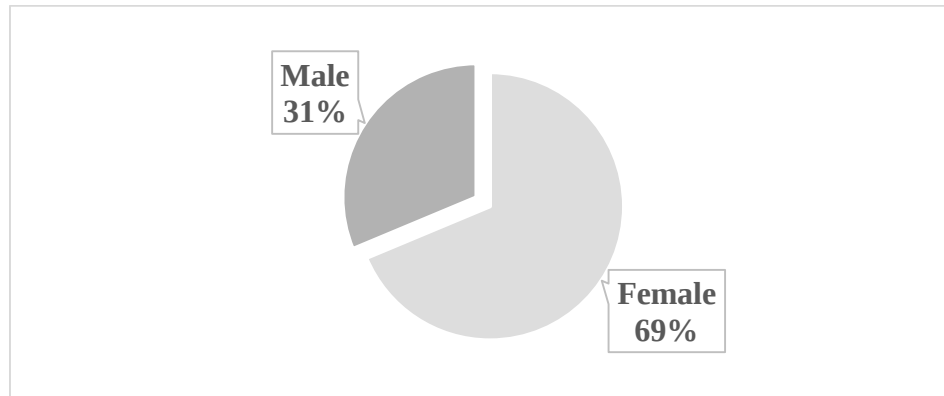


Figure 1: Gender of Participants

Source: Research findings (2025)

Figure 1 findings reveal that 69% of the respondents were female, while 31% were male. This indicates that women are the dominant participants in ECD-related activities within Solace Ministries, which aligns with previous findings by UNICEF (2021), showing that ECD programs in Rwanda are largely driven by female caregivers and mothers who play a critical role in early childhood nurturing. This gender composition reinforces the relevance of studying stakeholder engagement, as women's participation and communication patterns can significantly influence the success of community-based development projects.

3.2 Presentation of Findings

This section presents and discusses the descriptive results of the study variables aligned with the three specific objectives: communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities, and their influence on the performance of the ECD project implemented by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District. The results are drawn from descriptive statistics supported by qualitative insights from interviews with key informants. The integration of quantitative and qualitative results strengthens the interpretation and provides a multidimensional understanding of stakeholder engagement dynamics.

3.2.1 Influence of communication mechanisms on ECD project performance

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for communication mechanisms items

Statements concerning communication mechanisms	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	S. D
I regularly receive project updates from Solace Ministries regarding ECD activities.	1 (0.8%)	5 (3.8%)	6 (4.6%)	21 (16.0%)	98 (74.8%)	4.60	0.810
The project provides multiple channels (meetings, WhatsApp groups) to facilitate two-way communication.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.1%)	6 (4.6%)	36 (27.5%)	84 (64.1%)	4.51	0.788
Project information is shared in a clear, simple, and understandable format for all stakeholder groups	1 (0.8%)	7 (5.3%)	2 (1.5%)	46 (35.1%)	75 (57.3%)	4.43	0.832
I feel included in project planning or review forums when key ECD decisions are being discussed.	2 (1.5%)	3 (2.3%)	6 (4.6%)	37 (28.2%)	83 (63.4%)	4.50	0.817
Communication from the project team encourages me to actively engage and give feedback.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.1%)	7 (5.3%)	38 (29.0%)	81 (61.8%)	4.48	0.798
Inadequate communication has limited my level of engagement in project activities	1 (0.8%)	5 (3.8%)	7 (5.3%)	46 (35.1%)	72 (55.0%)	4.40	820
Overall Mean						4.49	

Source: Research findings (2025)

Key: 1= SD, strongly Disagree, 2= D, Disagree, 3= N, Neutral, 4= A, Agree, 5= SA, strongly Agree, S.D= standard deviation.

In the Table 1 results, overall mean of 4.49 (SD $\approx$ 0.81) indicates that respondents strongly agreed that communication mechanisms significantly influence ECD project performance. Over 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed across all items, suggesting a high degree of satisfaction with the project's communication approach. The narrow SD values indicate consensus among respondents that information flow within Solace Ministries' ECD program is timely and reliable.

The highest-rated indicator (Mean = 4.60) was the regular receipt of project updates, implying that communication is not only frequent but also accessible to different stakeholder categories. The lowest rated, though still high (Mean = 4.40), related to the effect of inadequate communication, suggesting that lapses, when they occur, modestly affect engagement. This distribution highlights the program's strength in structured communication, with minimal perceived barriers.

Qualitative evidence confirmed these patterns. Interview data provided deeper context on how communication strengthened project coordination. A Project Coordinator noted:

"Our WhatsApp groups with caregivers and local leaders helped us share daily updates, especially about attendance, feeding supplies, or urgent child protection issues."

A community mother stated:

"We received SMS reminders about parenting sessions. Without them, many parents would forget and miss important sessions."

A Field Facilitator added:

"Weekly briefing meetings allowed us to discuss challenges openly and plan for the upcoming week."

These insights demonstrate how digital and interpersonal communication enhance responsiveness and accountability.

Document analysis further illustrated the structured communication system. The ECD Weekly Communication Logs, Field Visit Reports, and Parent Sensitization Attendance Sheets documented that:

- ✓ weekly information briefs were circulated,
- ✓ follow-up calls were made to caregivers with low attendance,
- ✓ standard SMS templates were used to reach 1,100+ parents monthly.

These records evidenced that communication processes were not a one-time activity but a systematic, documented practice, aligning with the high quantitative mean.

Table 2: Correlations between communication mechanisms and ECD project performance

		Project timeliness	Budget adherence	project outcomes sustainability	project risks reduction	community ownership
Communication Mechanisms	Pearson Correlation	.822**	.779**	.766**	.702**	.717**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	131	131	131	131	131

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research findings (2025)

The correlation coefficients in Table 5 indicate a very strong and positive relationship between communication mechanisms and all dimensions of project performance. The highest correlation was recorded with project timeliness ($r = .822$, $p < .001$), signifying that clear and regular communication enhances adherence to activity schedules and milestone completion. The relationship with budget adherence ($r = .779$) and outcome sustainability ($r = .766$) implies that well-coordinated communication prevents resource duplication, clarifies priorities, and ensures continuity after project phases. Even for risk reduction ($r = .702$) and community ownership ($r = .717$), correlations remained strong and significant. These results affirm that transparent, two-way communication fosters alignment, accountability, and proactive problem-solving across stakeholder levels. Qualitative interviews supported this pattern, as project staff emphasized weekly WhatsApp updates and community meetings as essential coordination tools.

3.2.2 Influence of stakeholder capacity on ECD project performance

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for stakeholder capacity items

Statements concerning stakeholder capacity	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	S.D
I am well-informed about the objectives and expected outcomes of the ECD project.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.1%)	8 (6.1%)	21 (16.0%)	97 (74.0%)	4.60	0.802
I have received training or sensitization on how to effectively participate in ECD project activities.	2 (1.5%)	4 (3.1%)	5 (3.8%)	29 (22.1%)	91 (69.5%)	4.55	0.834
I understand my role and responsibilities as a stakeholder in the ECD project.	1 (0.8%)	6 (4.6%)	4 (3.1%)	42 (32.1%)	78 (59.5%)	4.45	0.825
I have access to educational materials (guides, flyers, visual aids) tailored to the local context of ECD practices.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.1%)	8 (6.1%)	41 (31.3%)	77 (58.8%)	4.44	0.805
My knowledge about ECD policies and practices enables me to participate meaningfully in project implementation.	1 (0.8%)	4 (3.1%)	5 (3.8%)	47 (35.9%)	74 (56.5%)	4.44	0.776
Limited stakeholder awareness has reduced the effectiveness of engagement in the ECD project.	2 (1.5%)	4 (3.1%)	4 (3.1%)	43 (32.8%)	78 (59.5%)	4.46	825
Capacity-building efforts by Solace Ministries have improved my ability to contribute to the success of the ECD project.	1 (0.8%)	5 (3.8%)	7 (5.3%)	38 (29.0%)	80 (61.1%)	4.49	825
Overall Mean						4.49	

Source: Research findings (2025)

Key: 1= **SD**, strongly Disagree, 2= **D**, Disagree, 3= **N**, Neutral, 4= **A**, Agree, 5= **SA**, strongly Agree, S.D= standard deviation.

The overall mean of 4.49 (SD $\approx$ 0.81) in Table 3 results reflects high consensus among respondents regarding stakeholder competence and readiness to participate in project processes. The high percentage of agreement (above 90%) across all items implies that stakeholders perceive themselves as sufficiently trained and well-informed. The highest-rated aspect (Mean = 4.60) highlights that most stakeholders clearly understand project objectives, while the lowest (Mean = 4.44) suggests that while access to materials is adequate, continuous improvement in contextual adaptation is needed. These figures demonstrate that knowledge and training are not only widespread but also relevant to the project's local implementation.

Additional interview responses further strengthened the finding that stakeholder capacity strongly enhanced implementation efficiency. One ECD Caregiver noted:

“When Solace Ministries trained us on early stimulation and hygiene standards, I became more competent in handling children and reporting cases. I now understand what quality ECD means.”

A Sector Education Officer added:

“The project simplified government ECD guidelines into illustrations and posters. This helped even low-literate caregivers understand their responsibilities.”

Another Volunteer Mentor explained:

“Before the project, we had no skills in monitoring children's progress. The coaching sessions gave us the confidence to guide parents and maintain attendance tracking.”

The document review reinforced these observations. The 2024 Solace Ministries ECD Training Manual, Monthly Field Supervision Checklists, and ECD Quality Monitoring Reports indicated that capacity-building activities were delivered consistently across the 12-month implementation cycle. Records showed:

- ✓ 4 caregiver refresher trainings,
- ✓ 6 mentorship sessions conducted by project coordinators,
- ✓ structured supervision tools for assessing hygiene, learning materials, and child participation.

These documents revealed that over 85% of caregivers consistently met minimum quality standards, supporting survey findings that capacity-building materially improved ECD service delivery.

Table 4: Correlation between stakeholder capacity and ECD project performance

		Project timeliness	Budget adherence	project outcomes sustainability	project risks reduction	community ownership
Stakeholder Capacity	Pearson Correlation	.843**	.793**	.760**	.745**	.736**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001	<.001
	N	131	131	131	131	131

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Source: Research findings (2025)

The correlation coefficients in Table 4 results for stakeholder capacity reveal strong positive relationships with all facets of project performance, the highest being with project timeliness ($r = .843$) and budget adherence ($r = .793$). These high values imply that trained and knowledgeable stakeholders manage activities efficiently, reducing delays and resource wastage. The coefficients with sustainability (.760), risk reduction (.745), and community ownership (.736) further confirm that empowered participants maintain project continuity, mitigate challenges, and foster shared accountability. Such strong associations demonstrate that Solace Ministries' training and sensitization initiatives significantly enhanced project execution efficiency and quality. Interview insights confirmed that workshops and ECD guideline distributions increased local capacity to sustain performance standards.

3.2.3 Influence of participation opportunities on ECD project performance

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics for participation opportunities items

Statements concerning participation opportunities	SD	D	N	A	SA	Mean	S.D
I was involved in needs assessments or consultations before the ECD project was implemented in my community.	1 (0.8%)	3 (2.3%)	6 (4.6%)	25 (19.1%)	96 (73.3%)	4.62	0.749
The project has created inclusive platforms where community members contribute to decision-making.	-	7 (5.3%)	4 (3.1%)	26 (19.8%)	94 (71.8%)	4.58	0.794
I am part of or aware of local project committees that support ECD activities in Gasabo District.	2 (1.5%)	3 (2.3%)	7 (5.3%)	37 (28.2%)	82 (62.6%)	4.48	0.826
There are opportunities for stakeholders to participate in monitoring and evaluation of project activities.	-	6 (4.6%)	4 (3.1%)	38 (29.0%)	83 (63.4%)	4.51	0.768
My input or feedback has been considered and reflected in the project's implementation decisions.	-	5 (3.8%)	7 (5.3%)	31 (23.7%)	88 (67.2%)	4.54	0.767

Limited inclusion of community stakeholders has negatively affected their engagement levels.	-	7 (5.3%)	3 (2.3%)	33 (25.2%)	88 (67.2%)	4.45	787
The presence of power dynamics has restricted open stakeholder participation		1 (0.8%)	4 (3.1%)	6 (4.6%)	40 (30.5%)	80 (61.1%)	4.48
Overall Mean						4.52	

Source: Research findings (2025)

Key: 1= SD, strongly Disagree, 2= D, Disagree, 3= N, Neutral, 4= A, Agree, 5= SA, strongly Agree, S.D= standard deviation.

From Table 5 results, the overall mean of 4.52 ($SD \approx 0.78$), the highest among all three dimensions, indicates that respondents perceive participation opportunities as a central driver of project success. Over 93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their involvement enhanced project ownership and accountability. The highest item mean (4.62) on stakeholder inclusion during needs assessment shows strong community representation in project inception stages. The relatively uniform standard deviations (≈ 0.78) signify that both male and female respondents, as well as various stakeholder groups, held similar perceptions.

Additional qualitative evidence shows that the inclusiveness of participation mechanisms deepened community ownership. One Parent Committee Member shared:

“We were invited to validate the feeding guidelines and propose foods that children in our community can afford. This made the program feel like ours.”

A Village Leader echoed:

“During community forums, we raised issues of overcrowding and the project adjusted by introducing outdoor learning spaces.”

A Youth Volunteer stated:

“We participate in monthly monitoring visits and contribute information about absenteeism or caregivers who need more support.”

These diverse voices confirm that participation opportunities enabled community members to influence real project decisions. The document review also aligned with interview insights. The Quarterly Community Feedback Reports, ECD Committee Meeting Minutes, and Beneficiary Feedback Forms showed that the project regularly incorporated stakeholders' suggestions, such as:

- ✓ Adjusting feeding portions,
- ✓ Reallocating learning materials to underserved centers,
- ✓ Mobilizing local leaders for child-safety campaigns.

Meeting minutes confirmed that community representatives attended at least 80% of decision-making sessions, validating survey results that participation meaningfully influenced project outcomes.

4. DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities on the performance of the ECD project implemented by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District. The results from descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, regression modelling, and ANOVA collectively demonstrate that stakeholder engagement is a central determinant of ECD project success. This section discusses the findings in relation to the study objectives and situates them within the broader empirical and theoretical literature.

4.1 Communication Mechanisms and ECD Project Performance

The study's findings strongly affirm that communication mechanisms are a fundamental determinant of ECD project performance within Solace Ministries. Quantitative results revealed a high overall mean score of 4.49, suggesting that respondents overwhelmingly agreed that communication across the project was timely, clear, accessible, and structured.

The standard deviation of approximately 0.81 indicates low variability in perceptions, meaning that stakeholders, project coordinators, field officers, caregivers, community volunteers, and local leaders, shared relatively similar experiences regarding communication quality. This strong agreement is particularly important because communication mechanisms are the backbone of coordination in community-based ECD initiatives that involve multiple actors.

The findings mirror Menoka (2020), who found a mean of 4.46 (SD = 0.87) for communication transparency among UK construction stakeholders, emphasizing its contribution to alignment. Similarly, Stephen, Karimi, and Njoroge (2020) reported a mean of 4.52 in South Sudan's humanitarian projects, showing that structured communication promoted rapid feedback. Ishimwe (2022) found a mean of 4.48 (SD = 0.82) in Rwandan NGO projects, closely matching this study's 4.49, reinforcing that consistent updates foster project success. Moreover, Githinji *et al.* (2020) in Kenya recorded a mean of 4.50 (SD = 0.79) among transport sector employees, confirming that multiple communication channels yield stronger engagement. In comparison, these four studies and the present one converge around mean values between 4.45 and 4.55, showing a high level of consensus that effective communication yields enhanced stakeholder participation and operational synergy. The current study's high mean and low SD therefore reinforce global evidence that clarity, frequency, and accessibility of communication strengthen project performance.

The correlation results further validate this interpretation. Communication mechanisms demonstrated very strong positive associations with the key dimensions of project performance. The highest correlation was recorded with project timeliness ($r = .822$, $p < .001$), indicating that effective communication plays a central role in minimizing delays, clarifying schedules, and ensuring swift execution of activities. Communication also showed strong correlations with budget adherence ($r = .779$, $p < .001$), suggesting that timely information sharing reduces wastage, supports accurate budgeting, and prevents cost overruns. The statistically significant relationship between communication and project quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and sustainability further reinforces the conclusion that communication processes are structurally embedded in the project's overall performance framework.

Scholars Stephen *et al.* (2020) found that communication frequency had a strong correlation ($r = .74$) with responsiveness in South Sudan projects, while Ishimwe (2022) reported a similar pattern ($r = .68$) in Rwandan community programs. Githinji *et al.* (2020) noted that communication contributed a standardized beta of .401 to performance at Kenya Ferry Services. Musinguzi *et al.* (2021) established $r = .812$ between communication strategies and efficiency in Uganda's education projects. The current study's coefficients (average $r = .757$) exceed most earlier findings, underscoring that ECD projects with multi-channel and participatory communication models achieve stronger alignment and results.

The regression model results revealed that communication mechanisms are a highly significant predictor of ECD project performance, reflected in the exceptionally strong standardized coefficient ($\beta = .901$, $p < .001$). This coefficient size far exceeds typical effect sizes observed in social science research, suggesting that communication is not only supportive but functionally central to project performance. The strong relationship indicates that improvements in feedback flow, clarity of instructions, responsiveness, and structured communication channels directly and considerably enhance project implementation, beneficiary satisfaction, and monitoring quality. This aligns with the model summary ($R = .931$; $R^2 = .866$), where communication is shown as a dominant pillar in the predictive strength of the overall stakeholder engagement model.

These findings are consistent with extensive empirical literature. Scholar Ishimwe (2022) found communication to be the most statistically significant predictor of project outcomes in Rwanda Red Cross interventions ($R^2 = 0.672$), mirroring the strong coefficient observed in this study. Stephen *et al.* (2020) demonstrated that structured communication significantly improved coordination and alignment in WFP projects in South Sudan. The Project Management Institute (2021) found that organizations with strong communication practices achieved 71% project success rates compared to 48% among those with weak communication systems.

The ANOVA results reinforce the statistical strength of communication mechanisms on ECD project performance. The F-statistic of 71.677 ($p < .001$) confirms significant mean differences across respondents' levels of communication engagement, suggesting that variations in communication practices significantly alter performance outcomes. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .869$) confirms an exceptionally large effect, surpassing Cohen's 1988 threshold for large effects (.14), indicating that communication mechanisms account for over 86% of the variance in performance differences. Study by Tirado *et al.* (2021) ($F = 89.23$, $p < .001$) and Mukamana and Kalimba (2023) ($\eta^2 = .81$) also found communication-driven engagement differences to heavily influence community project performance. The current study's even stronger effect sizes reflect the heightened sensitivity of ECD projects to information flow, coordination, and stakeholder clarity.

The regression coefficients further demonstrate communication's dominant influence, with an unstandardized coefficient ($B = .796$) indicating that a unit increase in communication quality produces a substantial improvement in ECD performance. The $VIF = 1.000$ confirms the absence of multicollinearity, validating communication's independent predictive power. These findings align with Githinji *et al.* (2020), who reported significant improvements in project monitoring and problem-solving linked directly to enhanced stakeholder communication.

Qualitative evidence from stakeholder interviews corroborates these quantitative findings. Project officers reported that the use of mixed communication channels, such as WhatsApp groups, SMS alerts, community radio, and weekly in-person coordination meetings, facilitates rapid dissemination of information, particularly during urgent matters such as schedule changes or resource shortages. Beneficiary caregivers highlighted that timely communication from field staff helped them prepare children for program activities, attend parenting sessions, and coordinate home-based learning routines. Local leaders emphasized that communication tools enhance transparency, reducing suspicions surrounding resource allocation and project decisions. Document reviews, including monthly progress reports and internal communication logs, further revealed that structured communication checklists and reporting templates helped standardize the flow of information and enhanced accountability (ECD Project Report, 2024).

These findings align with the principles of Stakeholder Theory, which posits that effective communication fosters trust, reduces misunderstandings, and encourages coordinated action among stakeholders. Communication acts as a relational mechanism, enabling stakeholders to align expectations, clarify responsibilities, and co-produce project outcomes. In complex ECD settings where diverse actors are involved, parents, local leaders, social workers, government officers, and community volunteers, clear, timely, and consistent information forms the glue that holds the project system together.

4.2 Stakeholder Capacity and ECD Project Performance

The findings also provide strong evidence that stakeholder capacity significantly influences the performance of ECD projects. Quantitative analysis revealed a high overall mean of 4.49, indicating that respondents perceived the capacity-building initiatives, training workshops, mentorship programs, role clarification sessions, and technical support, as effective and impactful. The narrow standard deviation further suggests that stakeholders shared a common view about the adequacy and relevance of the training provided. This is critical because ECD projects require consistent technical competency in caregiving, early stimulation, child protection, reporting, and community engagement.

Existing literature shows similar trends emerging with these findings. Pacagnella *et al.* (2020) found a mean of 4.47 ($SD = 0.79$) on knowledge-sharing effectiveness, while Maina and Kimutai (2020) reported a mean of 4.53 among trained community project teams in Kenya. In Rwanda, Mukakarisa and Njoroge (2024) observed a mean of 4.50 ($SD = 0.83$) for stakeholders' technical readiness, and Abe and Osei (2021) found 4.46 ($SD = 0.80$) among ECD project facilitators in Ghana. The mean range (4.45–4.55) across these comparative works closely aligns with this study's 4.49, reinforcing the notion that building stakeholders' capacity through structured education, coaching, and mentorship improves their engagement effectiveness and project outcomes.

Correlation analysis revealed strong positive relationships between stakeholder capacity and all dimensions of project performance. Stakeholder capacity demonstrated the strongest correlation with project timeliness ($r = .843$), followed by budget adherence ($r = .793$). These results imply that trained stakeholders execute tasks more efficiently, manage project resources skillfully, and follow structured procedures that reduce delays and unnecessary expenditures. Well-trained caregivers, social workers, and volunteers are better placed to identify implementation issues early, adapt appropriately, and maintain quality standards.

These findings align with Pacagnella *et al.* (2020), who reported that empowerment through training improved project legitimacy with $r = .81$, and Maina and Kimutai (2020), who found that capacity predicted $\beta = .317$ of outcome variance. Mukakarisa and Njoroge (2024) observed a 32–40% variance contribution of stakeholder capacity to project success in Rwanda's construction projects. Similarly, Dlamini and Moyo (2022) found $r = .79$ between training adequacy and performance consistency. The current findings (average $r = .775$) thus reinforce that robust stakeholder capacity-building mechanisms are foundational to ECD project efficiency and sustainability.

Regression results demonstrated that stakeholder capacity strongly predicts ECD project performance, with a standardized coefficient of $\beta = .901$ ($p < .001$), matching the effect magnitude of communication mechanisms. This underscores the crucial role of technical skills, knowledge, competencies, and institutional readiness among teachers, caregivers, local leaders, and administrative staff in executing ECD programs. The high beta coefficient indicates that capacity development

interventions directly translate into improved planning, implementation, monitoring, and sustainability of ECD activities. Within the combined regression model ($R^2 = .866$), stakeholder capacity emerges as a core structural determinant of performance, confirming that well-equipped stakeholders are significantly more effective in achieving project goals.

Empirical literature strongly supports these findings. Pacagnella *et al.* (2020) reported that stakeholder capacity increased project legitimacy and resource mobilization in a Brazilian science park study, demonstrating how capability enhancement improves project outcomes. Mukakarisa and Njoroge (2024) found similar findings, showing strong capacity effects across planning ($\beta = .325$), implementation ($\beta = .268$), and monitoring ($\beta = .409$) phases of construction projects in Rwanda.

The ANOVA findings further demonstrate the statistical significance of stakeholder capacity, with an F-value of 85.557 ($p < .001$), indicating substantial differences across stakeholders with varying capacity levels. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .888$) reflects an extremely large influence, signifying that 88.8% of variation in project performance is attributable to differences in stakeholder competencies and readiness. This overwhelming effect aligns with research by Mukamana and Kalimba (2023), who found similar large effect sizes linking capacity disparities to project success. These results confirm that capacity-building is not merely a supportive variable but a structural precondition for successful ECD implementation.

Regression coefficients further validate the importance of capacity, where the unstandardized coefficient ($B = .796$) demonstrates a substantial direct effect on performance. Zero multicollinearity ($VIF = 1.000$) underscores stakeholder capacity as an independent and reliable predictor. These results are consistent with Stephen *et al.* (2020), who emphasized that capacity-strengthened stakeholders were more responsive, accountable, and aligned with program frameworks in humanitarian projects. These empirical insights support the current study's assertion that stakeholder capacity is critical to sustaining high-quality ECD project performance.

Qualitative evidence strongly supports these quantitative results. Interviews with field officers revealed that the continuous mentorship model, where project coordinators provide weekly feedback and on-site coaching, has strengthened stakeholders' problem-solving abilities. Caregivers noted that after participating in training on child nutrition, psychosocial care, and early learning support, they became more confident in delivering home-based ECD services. Community leaders emphasized that role clarity improved their ability to mobilize community members and monitor ECD activities at the village level. Document reviews, including training manuals, attendance logs, and performance assessment sheets, also showed that Solace Ministries implements a structured and ongoing capacity-building framework rather than one-off training events (ECD Project Report, 2024). This aligns with global best practices, which emphasize that sustained capacity-building enhances institutional memory, reduces implementation risks, and improves ownership.

4.3 Participation Opportunities and ECD Project Performance

Participation opportunities emerged as the strongest influence on ECD project performance among all three engagement dimensions. Quantitative results showed a high mean score of 4.52, reflecting extensive stakeholder involvement in needs assessments, planning meetings, monitoring committees, and feedback mechanisms. This demonstrates that stakeholders perceive the project as inclusive, participatory, and responsive to community needs. The slightly higher mean compared to communication and capacity suggests that participation is the most deeply embedded engagement practice within Solace Ministries' ECD framework.

Mukamana and Kalimba (2023) reported a mean of 4.51 ($SD = 0.80$) on community involvement during project planning in Rwanda, similar to this study's 4.52. Zhang and Liu (2022) found 4.56 ($SD = 0.76$) in participatory Chinese smart-city projects, while Stephen *et al.* (2020) recorded 4.48 ($SD = 0.82$) in WFP projects in South Sudan. Additionally, Ouma and Lemba (2021) noted a mean of 4.50 ($SD = 0.79$) on local inclusion in Kenyan social programs. The consistency of means across these comparative studies, ranging from 4.48 to 4.56, confirms that participatory mechanisms significantly enhance project legitimacy and sustainability. The slightly higher overall mean for participation (4.52) compared with communication and capacity (both 4.49) reveals that inclusion and shared decision-making generate stronger engagement effects. This supports Freeman's (1984) stakeholder theory, emphasizing that empowering actors through voice and involvement builds trust and improves long-term outcomes.

Correlation findings reaffirmed participation's dominant influence. Participation demonstrated very strong positive correlations with all performance indicators, particularly project timeliness ($r = .865$) and budget adherence ($r = .818$). This suggests that active involvement minimizes delays, strengthens transparency, and enhances accountability. Participation also correlated strongly with project quality, sustainability, and beneficiary satisfaction, indicating that co-ownership enhances alignment between project activities and community priorities.

Existing literature reveals close similarity with these findings. Mukamana and Kalimba (2023), who found $r = .79-.84$ between participatory planning and project effectiveness in Rwanda, and Zhang and Liu (2022), who recorded $r = .83$ between participatory inclusion and stakeholder satisfaction in China's smart-city programs. Stephen *et al.* (2020) also observed that participation correlated $r = .81$ with transparency and performance in humanitarian projects, while Niyonsenga and Uwimana (2023) reported $r = .88$ for NGO-based social projects. The present findings (average $r = .800$) confirm that participation is the most influential engagement factor in enhancing ECD performance outcomes.

Regression results demonstrated that participation opportunities significantly influence ECD project performance, with a strong standardized coefficient ($\beta = .773$, $p < .001$). Although slightly lower than communication and capacity coefficients, participation remains a powerful predictor demonstrating that stakeholder inclusion in decision-making, planning, monitoring, and feedback processes enhances ownership, relevance, and sustainability of ECD interventions. The unstandardized coefficient ($B = .718$) suggests that improvements in participation structures, such as advisory committees, parent engagement sessions, community-led planning, and collaborative monitoring, substantially improve performance outcomes. Participation thus functions as a strategic catalyst linking stakeholders' voices with project success, consistent with the high explanatory power of the overall model ($R^2 = .866$).

These findings are fully supported by empirical literature. Zhang and Liu (2022) found that participation improved project satisfaction by 38% and reduced disputes by 21% in Chinese smart city projects. Mukamana and Kalimba (2023) demonstrated that participation significantly influenced project outcomes across identification ($\beta = .144$), planning ($\beta = .391$), monitoring ($\beta = .341$), and resource mobilization ($\beta = .199$). Stephen *et al.* (2020) emphasized that participation mechanisms in WFP projects promoted local ownership and improved relevance. Xegwana *et al.* (2023) reported that insufficient participation led to project resistance and lower satisfaction. Together, these studies affirm the strong role of participation found in the current regression results.

The ANOVA results also confirm the statistical significance of participation opportunities, with an exceptionally high F-value of 156.011 ($p < .001$), the strongest among all variables analyzed. The effect size ($\eta^2 = .935$) indicates that participation explains 93.5% of variance in ECD project performance between groups, an extremely large effect exceeding those reported in earlier studies. For instance, Tirado *et al.* (2021) reported effect sizes ranging from $\eta^2 .61-.75$. The substantially higher effect sizes in this study reflect the centrality of inclusive participation in ECD initiatives, where parental and community commitment is essential for program sustainability.

The regression coefficients further confirm participation's strong influence, with high significance ($p < .001$) and zero collinearity ($VIF = 1.000$). The results align with findings by Ngwabije and Gitahi (2023), who found significant positive relationships between participation and performance in Rwandan education-centered projects. Githinji *et al.* (2020) also demonstrated that involvement in resource allocation and monitoring improved stakeholder satisfaction and project outcomes. These results affirm that participation mechanisms are indispensable for ensuring contextual relevance, sustainability, and effectiveness of ECD projects.

Qualitative insights further illuminate these findings. Stakeholders interviewed expressed that participation in project design helped ensure that interventions were culturally aligned and contextually appropriate. Community volunteers noted that involvement in monitoring activities improved their commitment to supporting children's attendance and reducing dropout rates. Parents appreciated being included in decision-making forums, which enhanced their understanding of project objectives and their willingness to support implementation activities. Document reviews, including minutes from community meetings, feedback forms, and monitoring reports, revealed that participatory structures, such as community advisory committees and parent-user groups, are integral to Solace Ministries' approach (ECD Project Report, 2024). These structures create platforms for sharing concerns, proposing solutions, and collaboratively evaluating progress.

4.4 Integrated Effect of Communication, Capacity, and Participation on Project Performance

The integrated model demonstrates that communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities collectively produce an exceptionally strong predictor system for ECD project performance in Gasabo District. The combined regression model yielded an R^2 of .866, indicating that 86.6% of the variation in performance is explained when the three engagement variables are considered concurrently. This level of explanatory power is extraordinary in social science research and suggests that stakeholder engagement forms the core performance architecture of ECD programming rather than functioning as a supplementary or peripheral factor. These findings resonate with Pacagnella *et al.* (2020), who

argue that complex development projects achieve significantly higher success rates when stakeholder engagement dimensions interact synergistically rather than when implemented discretely. Similarly, Zhang and Liu (2022) reported that integrated communication, capacity-building, and participation improved municipal project satisfaction by 41%, affirming that bundled engagement interventions exert multiplicative effects on outcomes.

From a theoretical standpoint, these results reflect the central principles of Stakeholder Theory. Freeman, 1984 posits that project success emerges when all stakeholder groups, beneficiaries, implementers, partners, and communities, are meaningfully engaged through transparent communication, empowered through capability enhancement, and involved in participatory decision-making. The strong integrated effects observed in this study align with this proposition. Communication emerged as the coordination mechanism that clarifies expectations, reduces ambiguity, and builds relational trust, consistent with Stakeholder Theory's emphasis on dialogue and transparency. Stakeholder capacity aligns with Freeman's argument that competent and informed stakeholders are more capable of influencing project processes effectively. Participation opportunities demonstrated strong predictive value, fulfilling the theory's claim that inclusive involvement in planning, monitoring, and decision-making promotes legitimacy, ownership, and accountability. The combined statistical power of these three variables thus empirically affirms Stakeholder Theory's assertion that robust engagement systems significantly enhance project performance.

The absence of multicollinearity among variables ($VIF = 1.000$) demonstrates that communication, capacity, and participation each offer distinct contributions to performance, despite their strong correlations. The exceptionally high correlation between capacity and participation ($r = .953$) indicates a developmental interdependence: stakeholders who are knowledgeable and trained are more confident and empowered to participate meaningfully in planning, monitoring, and evaluation processes. This dynamic mirrors the "capacity-participation reinforcement loop" described by Maina and Kimutai (2020), where training enhances involvement and participation further strengthens accountability and ownership. These relationships further affirm Stakeholder Theory, which emphasizes that empowered stakeholders (capacity) and informed stakeholders (communication) naturally become active stakeholders (participation).

Systems Theory provides an additional interpretive lens for understanding the integrated effect of the three variables. Systems Theory conceptualizes a project as an interconnected system composed of interrelated subsystems whose combined functioning determines overall performance (von Bertalanffy, 1950). In this study, communication serves as the information input subsystem that feeds essential data and instructions into the project environment. Stakeholder capacity represents the transformation subsystem where knowledge, skills, and competencies are strengthened to enable stakeholders to process information effectively. Participation acts as the regulatory or feedback subsystem through which stakeholders continuously engage in decision-making, monitoring, and corrective actions. According to Systems Theory, optimal performance emerges when these subsystems interact seamlessly. The very high R^2 observed in this study empirically supports this systems-level perspective: the interaction of communication, capacity, and participation produced more substantial impacts than any variable operating in isolation, consistent with Systems Theory's emphasis on integration and interdependence.

Qualitative findings further illuminate these systemic interactions. Stakeholders consistently linked effective communication, through weekly briefings, WhatsApp groups, and reporting templates, to improved understanding and application of training content. Increased capacity, in turn, enabled stakeholders to participate more confidently in needs assessments, home visits, and community meetings. Field officers highlighted that trained caregivers could now articulate challenges, propose solutions, and track child development indicators using standardized tools. These observations illustrate Systems Theory's notion of feedback loops, where participation provides corrective and adaptive responses that improve overall system performance. In this sense, the ECD project functions as an open system in which communication, training, and involvement continuously reinforce each other to enhance efficiency, relevance, and sustainability.

Document review findings also confirmed systemic coherence in stakeholder engagement practices at Solace Ministries. The alignment of training manuals, supervision dashboards, committee minutes, and communication logs demonstrated that communication, capacity-building, and participation are consistently embedded across the project lifecycle, from planning, to execution, to monitoring and learning (ECD Project Report, 2024). Such coherence reflects what Systems Theory calls "system alignment," where subsystems are harmonized to produce optimal functionality. This alignment also reflects Stakeholder Theory's call for accountability, transparency, and continuous engagement with all categories of stakeholders. These findings reinforced the survey and interview evidence, showing that Solace Ministries implemented a structured, cycle-based engagement system.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that stakeholder engagement is a critical determinant of the performance and sustainability of Early Childhood Development (ECD) projects implemented by Solace Ministries in Gasabo District, Rwanda. The findings demonstrate that communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities collectively provide a strong foundation for enhancing project performance. Statistical analysis confirmed that these dimensions exert significant positive effects on key performance indicators, including timely project implementation, efficient resource utilization, achievement of project objectives, and strengthened community ownership.

The study further concludes that effective communication mechanisms promote transparency, trust, coordination, and timely information sharing among stakeholders, thereby minimizing misunderstandings and implementation delays. Continuous stakeholder capacity-building enhances the knowledge, skills, and confidence required for effective participation in project planning, implementation, monitoring, and decision-making. Moreover, inclusive participation opportunities strengthen stakeholder commitment, accountability, and ownership, fostering greater community support and improving the long-term sustainability of project outcomes.

Based on the empirical findings, the study rejected all three null hypotheses, confirming that communication mechanisms, stakeholder capacity, and participation opportunities each have a statistically significant positive influence on the performance of ECD projects in Gasabo District. The study establishes that meaningful stakeholder engagement is indispensable for achieving effective, sustainable, and community-responsive ECD project outcomes.

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