**NEWS ARTICLE**

Effective social and stakeholder engagement essential for infrastructure development projects

**29 May 2023:** Behind every successful infrastructure project is an effective stakeholder engagement strategy. This can begin as early as during the design and even concept phase, says **Amelia Visagie**, Technical Director at leading consulting engineering and infrastructure advisory firm [Zutari](http://www.zutari.com). Visagie, based in Cape Town, heads up Social and Stakeholder Engagement at Zutari, along with fellow Technical Director **Tebogo Sebego**, based at the Tshwane head office.

“Our role begins with understanding the interests, values, concerns, perspectives, and needs of various stakeholder groups, as well as assessing the relative influence and power that different stakeholders have on the proposed project.,” explains Sebego. The broad-based social benefit aspect of any major infrastructure project involves many stakeholders, including communities, government officials, non-governmental organisations, and traditional authorities.

“If we do not involve communities and stakeholders from the onset, it can pose a major risk, leading to most projects being stopped prematurely,” says Visagie. A rule of thumb is that if there is a need for conflict management, it is probably already too late. “This results in us having to undo what has already happened, whereas if we had been involved from the beginning of the tender and proposal phases, we could have worked together with the client and all stakeholders.”

When stakeholders’ voices are heard, their concerns and expectations can be addressed and managed effectively. This creates a sense of ownership and buy-in from stakeholders, increasing their commitment to the project’s success. Moreover, engaging stakeholders fosters better communication, transparency, and trust, which contributes to building a collaborative and positive working environment.

“We open up engagement and communication, but most importantly we stay with the project throughout its lifecycle,” notes Sebego. An early stage of construction should include establishing a steering committee and selecting community liaison officers. During the construction phase, Zutari undertakes extensive social monitoring, which is vital to the project’s success.

“It is exciting to be upfront at the inception of any project,” says Visagie. She and Sebego lead the team of social and stakeholder engagement champions. This team specialises in assuring maximum economic sustainability on projects by reducing social risks and enhancing companies’ social licences to operate.

These champions conduct perception surveys and asset mapping to ascertain the needs and aspirations of local communities. “We build on that understanding as a basis to co-create an impact in conjunction with the client,” says Visagie. Sebego adds that the process is both rigorous and scientific, using tools such as Social Impact Assessment to analyse, monitor, and manage the planned and unplanned social consequences, both positive and negative, of proposed interventions and any social change processes created by those interventions.

“Once we are on the ground, we collect social or community intelligence which helps our team to understand the social dynamics, knowledge, experience, and attitude of the communities we work in. Such information equips us to know exactly how a community will act or react to the planned intervention. This informs how we plan our engagement in a manner that allows us to systematically identify, analyse, plan, and implement actions designed to ensure that we use the most effective strategy for the stakeholder engagement process,” says Sebego.

Visagie adds that such social intelligence is by itself “a pot of gold” for clients, as it is the result of powerful data that is collected. “We accumulate rich data to assist any client to mitigate project risks. It starts by establishing effective communication channels and listening to the voices of the community. It is not a top-down approach, and that is what makes such a huge difference. Instead of going in and just doing a tick-box exercise, we engineer meaningful and sustainable impact.” In today’s highly competitive business environment, having access to the right data can give clients and project managers a competitive advantage.

Listening to stakeholders is crucial to any project’s success. It ensures that their interests are aligned with the project’s objectives, builds trust and collaboration, and ultimately leads to better outcomes for all involved. The scope and demand for the value derived from the impact created by the social and stakeholder engagement team represents a major opportunity for Zutari in South Africa and as it continues to expand its presence into Africa.

International financing institutions such as the World Bank or European Investment Bank require that investors should appropriately assess the environmental and social impacts of development projects. Zutari continues to partner with local consultancies in Africa to deliver successfully on internationally financed infrastructure development projects. “We capacitate and empower local consultancies by providing strategic guidance, advisory, and review of the final deliverables to ensure that they meet international best practice,” concludes Visagie.

***Ends***

**Notes to the Editor**To download hi-res images for this news article, please visit <http://media.ngage.co.za> and click the Zutari link to view the company’s press office.

**About Zutari**

As an engineering and advisory firm, we believe infrastructure has unparalleled potential to create enduring impact. Never more relevant, this potential can be realised only if we plan, design, deliver and manage infrastructure in ways that maximise its value. Our work in water, transport, energy, resources, and built-environment infrastructure does just this – helping to nurture thriving communities, growing economies, and healthy environments.

At Zutari we understand that radical impact does not just happen; it requires more of us to connect differently, work smarter, and stay rooted.

**We connect differently**. Our broad collective of in-house experts connects across traditional disciplines to provide integrated results. We collaborate with clients, partners, and end-users, leaning into diverse perspectives to create superior solutions - together.

**We work smarter**. Our people lead the industry. We draw from deep technical skills, accrued over decades, and embrace the transformative power of digital technology to find simpler, better, and more innovative ways to deliver value.

**We stay rooted**. Few can rival our local capacity and understanding. Building on solid foundations, now 90 years in the making, we are trusted to shape locally relevant solutions through our extensive footprint in Africa and the Middle East.

At Zutari our people connect differently, work smarter, and stay rooted. Working in this way, we reliably deliver impact through infrastructure, making the world a better place – one project at a time.

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