

# Project Management Approaches for Sustainable Rural Development in Cameroon

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doi: 10.63593/FMS.2788-8592.2025.11.008

## Abstract

Development focus has increasingly shifted toward rural areas due to the recognition that rural and urban areas are critically interdependent and that rural areas can no longer be neglected. In response, many development agencies have relied on projects as a primary mechanism for achieving sustainable rural development; however, many such projects fail to achieve their intended objectives. This article is based on an empirical study that explored the challenges of managing rural development projects through four case studies conducted in the Centre Region of Cameroon. A qualitative approach was adopted, using secondary data collected from purposively selected journal articles and research reports, with document review as the main data collection method and content analysis for data interpretation. The study finds that conventional stakeholder-participation models, failure to apply project management principles, and lack of project management skills significantly hinder the success of rural development projects. It also identifies alternative stakeholder-participation models and strategies that can enhance effective project management. The article recommends that development projects be managed by professional project managers to ensure value for investment, while non-professional project managers should receive training in essential project management skills, tools, and techniques.

**Keywords:** project management, sustainable rural development, participatory development

## 1. Introduction

Rural areas are geographical territories located outside urban centers, generally characterized by low population density, scattered settlements, and agriculture as the predominant economic activity. Rural development refers to initiatives aimed at improving the overall quality of life of rural populations (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012; Leon, 2005). The pursuit of sustainable rural development is motivated by several factors, including pervasive poverty, overreliance on agriculture, and the increasing socio-economic significance of rural areas (Mwabu & Thorbecke, 2004; Wiggins, 2016). In Cameroon, for instance, rural communities face unique development challenges, including limited infrastructure, low community participation in projects, and difficulty sustaining donor-funded initiatives (Kimengsi, Balgah, & Gwan, 2016; Muluh, Kimengsi, & Azibo, 2019; Mfondo & Afanji, 2024). Consequently, many countries and development agencies have prioritized rural development as a key pillar in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) (Baró, 2016; Donovan, 2013). Within this context,

effective project management defined as the systematic application of knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to meet project requirements (PMI, 2013; Burke, 2004) emerges as a critical mechanism for realizing sustainable rural development outcomes.

Sustainable rural development encompasses the sustained improvement of the well-being of rural populations and the environmental conditions in which they live (Mwabu & Thorbecke, 2004; Wiggins, 2016). Globally, considerable attention has been directed toward improving the welfare of the approximately 75% of the world population residing in rural areas under challenging conditions (Anríquez & Stamoulis, 2007; Pearce & Robinson, 2015). In Africa, and particularly Cameroon, rural poverty is widespread, highlighting the urgent need for targeted development interventions (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012; Mfondo & Afanji, 2024). Rural underdevelopment is a central driver of poverty, as roughly 70% of Africans and 80% of the continent's poorest reside in rural areas dependent primarily on agriculture for their livelihoods (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012; Wiggins, 2016). Agriculture contributes nearly one-third of Sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product and provides employment to two-thirds of the workforce, making rural areas essential to regional economic development (Donovan, 2013; Sakaki & Koga, 2013). In Cameroon, rural communities continue to rely heavily on agriculture while facing challenges in diversifying their economic activities beyond farming (Mfondo & Afanji, 2024; Mbah & Franz, 2021).

The renewed focus on rural development in Cameroon is further motivated by the need to strengthen local capacities, enhance community participation, and build resilience against disasters and external shocks (Ashu & Van Niekerk, 2020; Kimengsi et al., 2016; Berardo, Heikkila, & Gerlak, 2014). Development in rural areas also requires addressing the difficulties of sustaining donor-funded projects, which often fail due to poor planning, inadequate stakeholder engagement, and limited local ownership (Muluh et al., 2019; Dye, Apondi, & Lugada, 2011). Effective stakeholder categorization and engagement are therefore critical, as studies in the Bui Division and other parts of Cameroon show that understanding the roles and interests of various actors significantly influences project outcomes (Nyanyoh & Wanie, 2024; Boon, Bawole, & Ahenkan, 2013; Reed, 2008).

The interdependence of rural and urban areas reinforces the importance of rural development. Rural areas not only provide essential goods and services to urban populations, such as food and recreational resources, but also serve as key sites for economic and social activities that support urban life (Leon, 2005; Tacoli, 2003; Tseng & Penning-Rowsell, 2012). Moreover, rural underdevelopment, manifested in poor infrastructure, limited access to water and electricity, and inadequate road networks, has historically driven rural-urban migration, exacerbating urban poverty (Nchuchuwe & Adejuwon, 2012; Mwabu & Thorbecke, 2004; GoK, 2009). Enhancing living standards and income generation in rural areas can mitigate this migration, reducing urban overcrowding and poverty while fostering balanced regional development (World Bank, 2001; Leahy & Goforth, 2014).

Given the critical role of rural areas in national and regional development, there has been a concerted global and local effort to implement rural development projects aimed at improving livelihoods and reducing poverty. Effective project management is central to the success of these initiatives, providing a structured approach to planning, executing, and monitoring interventions in ways that maximize social, economic, and environmental benefits (PMI, 2013; Burke, 2004; Baró, 2016). Therefore, understanding and addressing the challenges of project management in rural contexts, particularly in Cameroon, is essential for ensuring that development projects fulfill their intended objectives and contribute to sustainable rural development (World Bank, 2001; Hope, 2014; Chima, 2017).

This paper, therefore, seeks to examine how effective project management can contribute to sustainable rural development in Cameroon. It draws from an empirical review of four case studies conducted in the central region Yaoundé and integrates insights from existing African literature. The study highlights key management challenges, evaluates stakeholder participation models, and proposes strategies for professionalizing project management within rural development initiatives.

## 2. Research Objectives

This study was guided by the following specific objectives:

- i. To explore the key challenges encountered in managing rural development projects in Cameroon.
- ii. To examine the strategies that can enhance the effective management of rural development projects for sustainable outcomes.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Research Design

This article is based on a qualitative research design, which emphasizes an in-depth understanding of the processes, challenges, and strategies related to the management of rural development projects. The qualitative approach was adopted to allow for a comprehensive exploration of the contextual realities influencing project

effectiveness in Cameroon (Creswell, 2014).

### 3.2 Data Collection

The study primarily relied on secondary data obtained through extensive documentary review. Data were collected from a wide range of sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, institutional reports, policy documents, and credible online publications. The use of document review as the principal data collection method allowed for the integration of existing empirical evidence and theoretical insights from various scholars and organizations relevant to rural development and project management (Effective Project Management for Sustainable Rural Development in Africa, 2025). A purposive sampling technique was employed to identify and select documents that were directly relevant to the study objectives. The inclusion criteria focused on materials discussing project management practices, rural development programs, and sustainability initiatives in Cameroon and other comparable African contexts. To ensure consistency and reliability, a document review checklist was developed and applied throughout the review process.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the content analysis technique, which is appropriate for synthesizing qualitative information obtained from textual sources (Krippendorff, 2018). Two main strategies were employed during analysis: thematic network analysis and pattern discovery. First, the thematic network analysis was used to identify and categorize key themes emerging from the reviewed literature in relation to the study objectives. These themes included project management challenges, stakeholder participation, capacity development, and sustainability mechanisms. Second, the identified themes were examined for recurring patterns and relationships, which were synthesized into broader conclusions and insights. This analytical approach ensured that the findings presented in this paper are grounded in evidence, reflect multiple perspectives, and contribute to a nuanced understanding of effective project management for sustainable rural development in Cameroon.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Overview of Findings

The findings of this study reveal that the management of rural development projects in Cameroon, much like in other parts of Africa, faces numerous challenges that hinder their effectiveness and sustainability. Two major findings emerged from this research. First, the study identifies the persistent challenges of managing rural development projects, many of which stem from the stakeholder-participation models adopted during project design and implementation. These models often fail to create meaningful engagement, leading to weak community ownership and project failure.

Second, the study presents potential strategies and frameworks for improving rural project management. Among these is the alternative stakeholder-participation model proposed by Muronga (2019), which offers a more inclusive and context-sensitive approach compared to conventional top-down models. This model emphasizes collaboration, shared accountability, and participatory decision-making principles that are vital for sustainable rural development.

### 4.2 Challenges Arising from Stakeholder-Participation Models

The study establishes that one of the major constraints to the success of rural development projects lies in the ineffectiveness of stakeholder-participation models used during project implementation (Reed, 2008; Boon, Bawole & Ahenkan, 2013). These models often fail to reflect the social, cultural, and economic realities of rural communities, thereby reducing local ownership and long-term sustainability.

#### 4.2.1 Challenges Related to the Top-Down Stakeholder-Participation Model

Findings indicate that the top-down stakeholder-participation model, which remains prevalent in many development initiatives, tends to limit the involvement of rural beneficiaries in decision-making. In such models, project decisions are predominantly made by external actors such as government officials, donors, and implementing agencies, while the local community is viewed merely as a recipient of interventions (Muronga, 2019; Berardo, Heikkilä & Gerlak, 2014). Empirical evidence from a study by Muronga (2019) on rural market stalls projects in Vihiga County (Kenya) demonstrated that the top-down model led to minimal community engagement and project stagnation. Similar dynamics are observable in Cameroon, where centralized planning and limited community inclusion often result in project abandonment and inefficient resource utilization (Chima, 2017; Nchuchuwa & Adejuwon, 2012). This finding aligns with the broader literature, which underscores that genuine stakeholder participation where local actors have agency in identifying needs, designing interventions, and monitoring progress enhances both accountability and sustainability (Heravi, Coffey & Trigunarsyah, 2015; Geaves & Penning-Rowsell, 2014).

#### 4.2.2 General Challenges of Project Management

Beyond participation issues, the study reveals that ineffective application of project management principles significantly undermines rural development efforts in Cameroon. Many projects are managed by individuals who lack professional project management training, leading to poor planning, inadequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E), and unsustainable outcomes (Burke, 2004; PMI, 2013; Nina & Gage, 2007). Inadequate capacity building, corruption, weak institutional frameworks, and poor coordination among implementing agencies further exacerbate project management inefficiencies (Awojobi, 2014; Hope, 2014). Consequently, the value of investment in development projects is often lost, and intended benefits fail to reach rural populations.

#### 4.3 Towards Effective Management of Rural Development Projects

The study finds that adopting alternative stakeholder-participation models, such as that proposed by Muronga (2019), can improve project success rates. This model integrates the perspectives of community members, government officials, and project managers through shared decision-making mechanisms. It also emphasizes transparency, local empowerment, and mutual accountability core principles highlighted in the Clarkson Principles of Stakeholder Management (Caux Round Table, 2018). Furthermore, the application of project management best practices such as risk assessment, scheduling, budgeting, and structured monitoring can significantly enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of rural development projects (Pearce & Robinson, 2015; PMI, 2013). Projects that align management techniques with community realities are more likely to achieve sustainable development outcomes (Badu et al., 2013; Leahy & Goforth, 2014).

##### 4.3.1 Enhancing Effective Project Management in Rural Areas

The challenges associated with rural development projects can be effectively addressed through the adoption of various strategies, including adherence to the core principles of project management and the application of complementary approaches that promote project success and sustainability.

##### 4.3.2 Principles of Project Management

Managers of rural development projects can improve the performance and sustainability of their initiatives by applying established principles of project management. One such principle is strategic leadership, which refers to the ability to influence stakeholders and mobilize their support toward achieving the organization's strategic goals and mission (Pearce & Robinson, 2015). Another essential principle is comprehensive project planning, which involves defining, preparing, and coordinating all subsidiary project plans and integrating them into a unified project management framework (Project Management Institute [PMI], 2013). Effective planning allows managers to align resources, timelines, and objectives for better outcomes. Equally important is project scope management, which ensures that a project encompasses all the work necessary to achieve its objectives successfully. Scope management includes scope definition, planning, verification, and control. A frequent challenge known as *scope creep* occurs when a project's scope expands gradually during implementation, leading to delays and cost overruns. Preventing scope creep is therefore critical to maintaining focus and efficiency (PMI, 2013). Time and cost management are additional principles that determine project success. Effective time management involves activity definition, sequencing, resource and duration estimation, schedule development, implementation, and control (PMI, 2013). Similarly, project cost management includes planning, budgeting, financing, and controlling costs to ensure that the project remains within the approved financial framework.

Furthermore, procurement management is vital in projects that rely on external suppliers or contractors. It includes procurement planning, solicitation, source selection, contract administration, and closeout (Burke, 2003). Quality management also plays a crucial role. Quality can be defined as the degree to which a product or service satisfies stated or implied needs. For a project to be successful, quality management processes must be implemented at every stage from planning and assurance to control (PMI, 2013). Human resource management ensures that the project makes effective use of personnel through careful organization planning, staff acquisition, and team development (Burke, 2004). In addition, communication management forms the backbone of project coordination and involves planning, information distribution, storage, retrieval, and performance reporting.

Another key area is risk management, as projects inevitably face uncertainties that can affect outcomes either positively or negatively. The PMI (2013) recommends integrating risk management into all project phases to anticipate, assess, and mitigate potential risks. Finally, stakeholder management (Caux Round Table for Moral Capitalism, 2018), effective monitoring and control, and change management (Anheier, 2005) are crucial principles. The theory of change emphasizes establishing systems that help teams adapt effectively to evolving project circumstances. Moreover, integration management ensures that all project processes from initiation to termination operate cohesively, supported by strong top management commitment, without which many projects are likely to fail.

##### 4.3.3 Approaches to Successful Project Management

Several approaches can enhance the success of rural development projects when applied appropriately. Two key

models are highlighted here. The endogenous development approach emphasizes local empowerment through the use of resources available within the community, local control of the development process, and the retention of profits within the local economy (Guinjoan, Badia, & Tulla, 2016). This contrasts with the exogenous development model, which relies heavily on external capital, technology, and expertise. Endogenous development is based on the premise that every territory possesses unique economic, social, institutional, and environmental resources that form the basis of its development potential (Hernando, 2007). According to Woods (2011), this model represents a paradigm shift from externally driven projects to locally driven initiatives, converting local communities into the main agents of development. The main limitation of this approach is the potential lack of adequate local resources; therefore, a balance between endogenous and exogenous approaches often yields the best outcomes.

The Web Model of Rural Development, as proposed by Muronga (2019), integrates participatory and collaborative frameworks where all stakeholders including local authorities, community members, NGOs, and funding agencies interact dynamically within a project network. This approach seeks to overcome the limitations of traditional top-down models by encouraging shared ownership and mutual accountability among all project participants. Such integrative models have been found to improve coordination, reduce redundancy, and promote sustainability by aligning project goals with community priorities and available resources.

## 5. Conclusion

Challenges related to the inappropriate application of stakeholder-participation models such as top-down, bottom-up, collaborative, and contractual approaches remain major impediments to the effective management of rural development projects. Additional constraints include the geographical dispersion of settlements, lack of trust between stakeholders and project staff, high levels of poverty, conservative political and social attitudes, insufficient grassroots information, language barriers, weak project management capacity, inadequate funding, and corruption. Addressing these challenges is critical to delivering the intended project outcomes and ensuring that rural development initiatives fulfil their objectives.

Effective project management is complex and requires specialized knowledge, tools, techniques, and context-sensitive approaches. It is essential that project sponsors engage professional project managers who can navigate the unique challenges of rural environments. Rural projects require the application of tailored management principles, such as strategic leadership, scope, time, cost, quality, human resource, risk, and stakeholder management, as well as integrated change management. By implementing these principles, rural development projects can achieve better efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability. Adherence to complementary approaches, including endogenous development, the 'web model' of rural development, green infrastructure initiatives, and participatory rural development, further strengthens project outcomes (Guinjoan, Badia, & Tulla, 2016; Woods, 2011; Hernando, 2007). When effectively applied, these strategies can transform rural projects into critical building blocks for sustainable rural development.

## 6. Significance of the Research

Rural development is a cornerstone of Africa's overall development trajectory, and Cameroon is no exception. Development agencies frequently implement projects aimed at enhancing rural livelihoods and reducing poverty. However, many of these initiatives have failed or underperformed due to inadequate management and limited adaptation to local realities. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the importance of effective project management in rural contexts and by proposing practical models and approaches that can improve the performance and sustainability of such projects (Muronga, 2019).

From a policy perspective, the study offers valuable guidance for governments, development agencies, and practitioners. It emphasizes the need for inclusive planning and implementation processes that engage all stakeholders, thereby fostering trust, teamwork, shared ownership, and conflict minimization. Additionally, the study presents the Capacity Building Stakeholder-Participation (CBSP) Model, which integrates a Capacity Building Team (CBT) and a Quality Assurance Team (QAT) to facilitate effective stakeholder engagement. This model provides a structured framework to enhance project management, accountability, and sustainability, particularly in complex rural settings.

## 7. Recommendations

All actors involved in rural development projects should carefully analyze the challenges that constrain effective planning and implementation. Understanding these challenges allows stakeholders to design strategies that enhance project performance. Development actors are encouraged to adopt approaches that promote sustainable and efficient project management. These include endogenous development, which leverages local resources and capacities; the 'web model' of rural development, which emphasizes multi-stakeholder collaboration; environmental conservation and green infrastructure initiatives, which support ecological sustainability; and participatory rural development, which empowers local communities to take ownership of development

processes. Furthermore, project sponsors should engage professional project managers who possess the necessary knowledge, skills, tools, and techniques to maximize investment value. In contexts where such expertise is unavailable, organizations should invest in continuous training and capacity building for project staff. Finally, rural projects must adopt methodologies that are tailored to the unique social, economic, and cultural realities of rural areas. By integrating professional management principles with context-appropriate approaches, rural development projects can achieve greater effectiveness, sustainability, and long-term impact.

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