THE STAKEHOLDER LISTENING INDEX™

Pilot Report

Commken Consult Afrique Ltd.

Executive Summary

Stakeholder engagement is no longer optional. Across development programmes, infrastructure projects, environmental initiatives, and multilateral interventions, participation has become standard practice. Consultations are convened. Workshops are facilitated. Attendance lists are captured. Reports are submitted to donors and boards.

Yet after years of working in these environments, one persistent question continued to surface for me: When stakeholders speak, what actually changes?

The Stakeholder Listening Index™ was developed from that question. It did not emerge from theory alone, although theory matters. It emerged from practice from sitting in community forums, from reviewing grievance registers, from observing highly committed project teams navigating donor constraints, and from listening to communities who felt included but not influential.

The Index is not designed as a public ranking tool or reputational device. It is a governance diagnostic. It examines whether engagement translates into influence, adaptation, and shared accountability. Rather than counting participation events, it assesses five dimensions of listening maturity: Inclusion, Dialogic Depth, Responsiveness, Power & Voice, and Learning & Adaptation.

This pilot applied the Index across three distinct contexts: environmental governance, infrastructure development, and multilateral programming. The findings are neither cynical nor celebratory. Inclusion practices are improving. Engagement systems are increasingly formalised. Documentation is more rigorous than it was a decade ago. However, meaningful power-sharing remains limited. Responsiveness frequently operates within predefined parameters. Organisational learning occurs, but rarely in ways that fundamentally reshape strategic direction. Listening, I have come to believe, is not a communications function. It is governance infrastructure.

This report presents the origins of the Index, the methodology used in the pilot, detailed reflections from the three cases, structural patterns observed across contexts, and practical pathways for organisations ready to move from consultation toward genuine listening.

1. Why This Index Was Developed

In my work across development and governance systems, I have encountered few organisations that deliberately ignore stakeholders. Most are genuinely trying. Engagement teams work long hours. Facilitators attempt to create safe spaces. Technical teams respond to grievances. Reports reflect effort. The challenge is rarely intention. It is structure.

Engagement processes are often embedded within compliance frameworks. They respond to environmental and social safeguards, regulatory requirements, ESG commitments, or donor

reporting obligations. These systems require documentation of participation. They do not necessarily require evidence of influence.

This creates what I have come to think of as a quiet governance gap.

Communities may attend meetings. Civil society may provide written submissions. Women's groups may articulate concerns. Youth may contribute ideas. Yet strategic decisions budget allocations, engineering assumptions, programme architecture are often already shaped by upstream institutional constraints.

Global governance trends reinforce this dynamic. Institutions such as the World Bank Group emphasise participatory accountability and stakeholder inclusion within safeguard policies and development frameworks. ESG standards call for consultation and disclosure. Multilateral guidelines stress transparency and engagement. These are important advances But inclusion is not the same as influence.

The Stakeholder Listening Index™ was developed to explore that distinction. It asks a different set of questions from traditional engagement monitoring:

- How does stakeholder input travel through an organisation?
- At what point does it stall?
- Where does it result in visible change?
- Who ultimately decides?
- Is feedback communicated back?

Listening is not an event. It is a pathway from expression, to recognition, to deliberation, to decision, to feedback closure, and ideally to institutional memory. The Index traces that pathway.

2. Methodology and Analytical Approach

This pilot was intentionally qualitative. Listening is relational, contextual, and often subtle. It cannot be meaningfully assessed through attendance figures alone. Across the three selected projects, the assessment included:

- Review of engagement plans and implementation reports
- Analysis of consultation minutes and workshop documentation
- Examination of grievance logs and response records
- Review of monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- Semi-structured interviews with project staff
- Conversations with community representatives and civil society actors
- Direct observation of selected engagement sessions where possible

Each case was assessed across five dimensions using a five-point scale ranging from symbolic engagement (1) to transformative listening (5).Scoring was not mechanical. It emerged through triangulation and guided reflection around recurring diagnostic questions:

- Who is present in engagement spaces?
- Who shapes the agenda?
- What forms of dissent are permitted?

- How are decisions documented?
- Where is influence visible?
- Are stakeholders informed about outcomes?
- Do lessons shape future strategy?

The intention was not to judge organisations, but to understand listening maturity patterns.

3. The Listening Framework in Practice

The Stakeholder Listening Index™ evaluates five interconnected dimensions. These dimensions are not independent; they interact and reinforce one another.

Stakeholder Inclusion

Inclusion asks not only who attends meetings, but who is intentionally sought out. It examines whether marginalised groups women, youth, minority communities, informal workers are structurally represented. It also questions whether representation is tokenistic or meaningful.

In several of the pilots, inclusion mechanisms were clearly improving. Targeted forums, language accessibility, and deliberate outreach were evident. Yet inclusion alone did not guarantee influence.

Dialogic Depth

Dialogic depth explores whether engagement is genuinely conversational. Can stakeholders question project assumptions? Can they challenge framing? Are sessions iterative, allowing revisiting of earlier decisions? Or are they primarily informational briefings followed by limited feedback collection?

In practice, many engagement sessions fall somewhere in the middle interactive, yet constrained by predefined parameters.

Responsiveness

Responsiveness examines whether feedback results in adjustment. This may occur operationally (e.g., adjusting meeting times, modifying site locations) or strategically (reconsidering priorities, reallocating resources).

Operational responsiveness was more common across the pilots. Strategic responsiveness was less frequent.

Power & Voice

This dimension interrogates influence. Even where inclusion and dialogue are present, final authority often remains centralised. Power & Voice asks whether historically marginalised stakeholders shape outcomes or remain consultative contributors. Across all three pilots, this was the most constrained dimension.

Learning & Adaptation

Listening becomes sustainable when it informs institutional learning. Are lessons embedded into policy? Are engagement methods refined over time? Does feedback influence future design?

Learning was strongest where formal monitoring systems existed. However, adaptation was often incremental.

4. Comparative Pilot Overview

Case	Inclusion	Dialogic Depth	Responsiveness	Power & Voice	Learning & Adaptation	Overall
Environmental Governance	4	3	3	3	3	3.2
Infrastructure Development	3	2	3	2	2	2.4
Multilateral Programme	4	4	4	3	4	3.8

The pattern is instructive. Inclusion scores are generally higher than Power & Voice. Institutionalisation improves Learning & Adaptation. Transformative listening where power is genuinely redistributed remains rare.

5. Case A: Environmental Governance Initiative

This initiative operated within semi-arid regions where environmental stewardship intersects directly with livelihoods and traditional authority structures. Engagement design reflected awareness of context. Women's forums were conducted in local languages. Indigenous representatives were included. Civil society actors were engaged at district and regional levels.

Inclusion mechanisms were strong and deliberate. However, engagement was often mediated through established leadership hierarchies. This respected cultural norms and facilitated coordination. At the same time, it introduced subtle filtering effects. Youth voices and dissenting perspectives were sometimes channelled through intermediaries, reducing their direct influence.

Dialogic spaces allowed contribution, but agendas were typically project-framed. Stakeholders could prioritise within defined categories but rarely reshape those categories.

Responsiveness was visible in tangible adjustments: re-prioritisation of sites, grievance resolution mechanisms, refinement of implementation schedules. Yet these adjustments remained within strategic boundaries already set.

Learning processes were supported through monitoring forums and cross-community exchanges. Still, adaptation tended to refine implementation rather than reconfigure direction.

This case represents mature procedural engagement approaching influential listening, yet still bounded by structural authority concentration.

6. Case B: Infrastructure Development Project

Infrastructure projects operate within tight technical and financial constraints. Engineering standards, procurement requirements, and funding tranches leave limited room for redesign once implementation begins. *Engagement* processes were organised and documented. Affected communities were informed and consulted at scheduled milestones. Concerns were recorded, and mitigation measures were discussed. Yet foundational design assumptions remained largely fixed.

Stakeholders influenced operational elements access points, scheduling, environmental *mitigation strategies. They did not influence core design architecture or funding structure.*

Power remained clearly centralised with project management and external financiers. Engagement primarily functioned as risk management reducing conflict, anticipating grievances, ensuring compliance. *Learning* occurred at operational levels, improving efficiency and coordination. Governance structure remained unchanged.

This case illustrates the "consultative ceiling" where engagement exists, but its transformative potential is structurally limited.

7. Case C: Multilateral Development Programme

The multilateral programme demonstrated the most developed listening architecture. Engagement platforms were formalised. Feedback channels were structured. *Response* timelines were clearer. Multiple sectors participated government agencies, civil society, technical experts, and community groups. Iterative forums allowed revisiting of earlier discussions.

In some instances, stakeholder input shaped adjustments to programme sequencing and resource allocation. Documentation reflected feedback integration more transparently than in the other cases. However, influence varied across stakeholder categories. Civil society actors often accessed higher-level deliberation spaces. Community-level participants remained primarily consultative.

This case approached influential listening. Yet even here, transformative power redistribution was partial.

8. Cross-Cutting Patterns

Across all three pilots, clear patterns emerged that reveal both progress and persistent challenges in stakeholder listening. These patterns offer practical insights for organisations seeking to move beyond perfunctory consultation toward genuine influence.

Inclusion is increasingly intentional.
Organisations are making deliberate efforts to reach beyond traditional leaders and dominant voices. Women, youth, indigenous groups, and other marginalised populations are increasingly invited to participate. Special forums, targeted outreach, and accessibility

measures—such as local language facilitation—signal recognition that representation matters. Yet, intentional inclusion does not automatically equate to influence. Even when the "right people" are present, their capacity to shape outcomes is often limited by structural hierarchies or predefined project agendas. The lesson is that inclusion is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for transformative listening.

Dialogue is structured but often bounded.

Engagement spaces are increasingly organised with clear formats, agendas, and facilitation techniques. Workshops, focus groups, and co-creation sessions demonstrate commitment to two-way conversation. However, these dialogues frequently operate within pre-set boundaries: the scope of discussion, timing, and framing are often controlled by project teams. Stakeholders can comment, prioritise, or refine details, but rarely redefine overarching strategies. This highlights the tension between formalised dialogue and true co-decision-making. Depth of dialogue is improved when organisations explicitly allow stakeholders to shape agendas and revisit earlier discussions iteratively.

Operational responsiveness is common.

Across all cases, organisations routinely responded to immediate, tangible feedback. Adjustments to meeting schedules, mitigation measures, or site-level decisions were common. These operational responses signal that stakeholders are being heard and that their input informs practical implementation. Such responsiveness builds credibility, demonstrates attentiveness, and can prevent minor frustrations from escalating into serious conflict.

Strategic responsiveness is constrained.

While operational adjustments are visible, feedback rarely translates into strategic change. Core project assumptions, funding allocations, or governance structures tend to remain fixed. Stakeholders' contributions influence execution more than policy or design. This highlights one of the persistent gaps in listening: moving beyond procedural compliance toward shaping the direction of projects and organisational strategy.

Power redistribution remains the most difficult shift.

Even in inclusive and structured engagements, authority is still concentrated. Traditional leaders, project managers, and donors hold ultimate decision-making power. Marginalised stakeholders may provide input, but their influence is often symbolic rather than transformational. Achieving meaningful power-sharing requires deliberate governance redesign, not only improved facilitation. Without addressing the structural asymmetries embedded in project architectures, engagement risks remaining performative.

Learning strengthens when feedback systems are institutionalised.

Formal monitoring frameworks, documented feedback loops, and knowledge management systems make organisational learning more likely. When lessons from engagement are embedded into strategy, future decisions reflect stakeholder input more reliably. In the pilots, cases with structured learning processes demonstrated incremental improvements in responsiveness and adaptation. This suggests that listening becomes sustainable when it is built into organisational DNA rather than treated as a one-off activity.

Feedback closure to communities remains inconsistent.

One of the most important trust-building mechanisms—demonstrating to stakeholders how their input influenced outcomes—was often missing or inconsistent. Without clear communication back to communities, the perception of engagement can deteriorate. "You

said, we did" practices were uneven, sometimes entirely absent, even in
well-resourced projects. Feedback closure not only validates stakeholder contributions but
reinforces the integrity of the listening process itself.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that while organisations are moving in the right
direction, transformative listening requires intentional effort across multiple dimensions:
structural authority, agenda control, strategic responsiveness, and communication
transparency. Listening cannot be treated as a discrete activity; it must be woven into the
governance fabric.

Listening maturity improves where influence pathways are visible and transparent.

9. Structural Barriers to Transformative Listening

Transformative listening does not happen in a vacuum. Even the most committed teams,
skilled facilitators, or well-resourced projects encounter systemic constraints that limit the
influence of stakeholder voices. Across the three pilot cases, several recurring structural
barriers became evident. These barriers are not merely procedural inconveniences; they are
embedded in governance design and organisational culture, shaping what is possible in
engagement.

Centralised decision authority.
In all pilots, ultimate decision-making power rested with a relatively small group of project
managers, technical leads, or external funders. Even when engagement platforms included
broad representation, these actors retained authority over core strategic choices. As a result,
stakeholders could provide input, raise concerns, or prioritise options, but they had limited
capacity to change project direction. Listening, in these contexts, often became procedural
rather than transformative, constrained by hierarchical decision-making.

Pre-approved project architecture.
Projects are frequently designed and approved before engagement begins. Funding
allocations, timelines, technical specifications, and governance arrangements are largely
fixed. This pre-approval creates an invisible ceiling for stakeholder influence: no matter how
much input is solicited, fundamental changes may be impossible without renegotiating
contracts, budgets, or regulatory approvals. Engagement therefore risks being perceived as
performative when structural flexibility is absent.

Donor conditionality and funding rigidity.
External funding comes with expectations, milestones, and legally binding agreements.
Donors often require adherence to predefined objectives, indicators, and reporting formats.
While these frameworks are designed to ensure accountability and efficiency, they can
inadvertently constrain adaptive listening. Stakeholder feedback that conflicts with
contractual obligations or pre-committed activities may be acknowledged but cannot always
be incorporated, limiting strategic responsiveness.

Compressed timelines.
Many projects operate under intense time pressures. Construction schedules, seasonal
implementation windows, or funding cycles impose strict deadlines. Under such conditions,
engagement often becomes a box-checking exercise: meetings are held, feedback collected,
and reports produced, but there is little time for deep deliberation, iterative dialogue, or
co-decision-making. Compressed timelines amplify the tension between procedural
compliance and meaningful listening.

Risk-averse institutional culture.
Organisations, particularly those accountable to external funders or public scrutiny, tend to avoid uncertainty. Risk-averse cultures prioritise predictable outcomes, established protocols, and minimising conflict over experimentation. In such environments, feedback that challenges assumptions or introduces uncertainty is often softened, delayed, or filtered. This cultural bias can prevent engagement from evolving into adaptive, learning-oriented dialogue.

Hierarchical mediation within communities.
Even when external systems are inclusive, local social structures often shape who speaks, how, and when. Community leaders, elders, or formal representatives frequently mediate engagement, filtering dissenting opinions and shaping priorities. While this can be culturally appropriate and efficient, it also introduces gatekeeping. Certain perspectives particularly youth, women, or marginalised minorities may be muted or reframed before reaching decision-makers, limiting the depth and authenticity of listening.

Taken together, these structural barriers highlight why transformative listening is more than a facilitation challenge. It requires deliberate governance design: redistributing decision authority, embedding flexibility into project architecture, negotiating with funders to allow adaptation, building time for iterative dialogue, cultivating organisational cultures that embrace uncertainty, and recognising local power dynamics while creating avenues for unmediated voices.

Addressing these barriers is hard. It demands courage, creativity, and intentional redesign at both institutional and operational levels. Yet, without confronting them, stakeholder engagement risks remaining procedural, performative, or symbolic —no matter how polished or well-intentioned the facilitation appears.

10. Listening as Risk Governance

One of the clearest lessons from the pilots is that listening strengthens institutional resilience. Where feedback pathways were weak, frustration accumulated quietly. Grievances surfaced late. Resistance intensified after implementation began. Where influence was visible and feedback closure was practiced, tension was addressed earlier. Trust was more durable. Adaptation was smoother.

Listening is therefore not simply ethical engagement. It is risk governance. It strengthens legitimacy and reduces long-term volatility.

11. Limitations and Ongoing Development

This pilot covers three cases across distinct sectors. Findings are interpretive and context-bound. The Index will continue to evolve as additional applications refine scoring criteria and expand comparative learning.

The goal is continuous improvement, not static measurement.

12. Applying the Stakeholder Listening Index™

The Stakeholder Listening Index™ is most effective when it is embedded into practice, not treated as a one-off exercise. Its value lies in helping organisations reflect on how well stakeholder engagement translates into influence, adaptation, and learning. Rather than

producing a public scorecard, the Index is intended to guide internal improvement, strengthen accountability, and cultivate a culture of responsive governance.

Internal diagnostic workshops involving cross-functional teams
One of the most practical ways to apply the Index is through workshops that bring together teams from across the organisation. This could include project managers, communications personnel, technical experts, monitoring and evaluation staff, and senior leadership. Through guided exercises, participants reflect on engagement practices, review evidence from past projects, and assess performance across the five dimensions of the Index. These workshops surface gaps, encourage shared understanding, and identify actionable steps to strengthen listening practices.

Independent facilitated assessments incorporating stakeholder interviews
For organisations seeking an external perspective, facilitated assessments allow an independent team to evaluate listening practices. This approach combines document review, observation of engagement processes, and interviews with stakeholders themselves. Hearing directly from the communities, civil society actors, and other affected parties ensures that the assessment captures both formal mechanisms and lived experience. It also reduces the risk of bias that can arise when internal teams self-assess.

Integration into monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems
The Index can be integrated into existing M&E frameworks to track listening over time. This approach ensures that stakeholder feedback is consistently measured not only in terms of participation or outputs but in terms of responsiveness, power distribution, and learning. By embedding listening indicators alongside operational metrics, organisations can build continuous improvement loops and demonstrate that engagement is influencing strategy and practice.

Annual listening maturity reviews aligned with governance cycles
To institutionalise the practice of listening, organisations can conduct annual "listening maturity" reviews. These reviews assess progress against previous assessments, highlight successes, and identify persistent structural challenges. Aligning these reviews with governance cycles — for example, strategic planning or board reporting reinforces the idea that listening is not an ad hoc activity but a core organisational capability.

A reflective, improvement-focused tool
The Index is designed as a reflective, learning-oriented resource. It is not intended to rank organisations publicly or serve as a reputational benchmark. Its value comes from prompting critical questions: Are stakeholders influencing decisions? Are marginalised voices amplified? Are lessons integrated into future strategies? By guiding honest reflection and structured dialogue, the Index helps organisations move from symbolic consultation toward genuine stakeholder influence, trust-building, and adaptive governance

13. Conclusion

Structured engagement has become the norm in many projects. Meetings are held, workshops convened, and reports filed. Yet genuine, transformative listening remains rare. The

difference is not in the number of sessions or consultations it is in
whether stakeholder voices actually travel through the organisation and shape decisions.

Listening becomes real governance infrastructure when stakeholders are able to help set agendas, when their input visibly influences decisions, when feedback is communicated back to them transparently, and when lessons are absorbed into the organisation's processes and culture.

The Stakeholder Listening Index™ is my contribution to making this influence visible. It provides a practical way for organisations to understand how well they are truly listening, to strengthen adaptive governance, and to turn engagement from a procedural requirement into a strategic capability.

About the Author

Antoinette Bonita Kamau is a seasoned communication specialist and knowledge management expert with exceptional skills in developing and implementing public relations programs, strategic communication strategies, crisis communication protocols, and stakeholder engagement strategies. She is passionate about highlighting developmental concerns and promoting sustainable development within the global arena through storytelling and evidence-based communication.

Antoinette is also a Trainer, Adjunct Lecturer at United States International University-Africa, and a Transformative Coach certified by Coach Masters Academy. She currently serves as the Chief Executive Officer and Lead Communications Consultant at Commken Consult Afrique Ltd, a PR and communications agency specialising in strategic communications, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge management systems.

She holds a Bachelor of Education Degree in Linguistics & Literature from the University of Nairobi, a Master's Degree in Communication from Daystar University, and is currently writing her Ph.D. dissertation entitled *"The Role of Dialogic Communication in Stakeholder Engagement: A Case Study of the Menengai Geothermal Plant"* at Daystar University

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For years I have worked inside stakeholder engagement processes across development, infrastructure and governance programmes.

Communities attend meetings. Civil society contributes thoughtfully. Reports are submitted.

But one question stayed with me:

When stakeholders speak, what actually changes?

Today I am sharing something I have been developing from practice, not just theory the Stakeholder Listening Index™.

It is not a checklist.

It is a diagnostic tool that examines whether stakeholder input genuinely influences decisions, redistributes voice, and produces institutional learning.

I piloted it across three projects in environmental governance, infrastructure, and multilateral programming.

The findings are nuanced.

Inclusion is improving.
Engagement systems are more structured.
But meaningful power-sharing remains limited.

Listening, I have come to believe, is governance infrastructure.

If you work in development, ESG, infrastructure, or public policy, I would welcome your reflections.

The full pilot report is now available on the Commken website.

Let's move beyond consultation toward genuine listening.