


Article

Stakeholder Management and Project Sustainability—A Throw of the Dice

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Abstract: The aim of this study was to analyze the strategies that external stakeholders apply to influence sustainable projects. In order to investigate this phenomenon, we employed a qualitative case study approach considering the Serbian small hydro power plant project. For the purpose of this research, we developed a theoretical framework consisting of four types of different influence strategies, which were identified and then applied to our case. The results show that external stakeholders utilized all four strategies interchangeably, with the goal to influence the project and decision-makers. The case of the small hydro power plant project revealed certain relationships between influence strategies, as well as the intensity and direction of these relationships. It also revealed that external stakeholders were highly motivated by negative impacts on the environment. Five propositions were derived as a result of our research. This paper contributes not just to the project and stakeholder management literature but also to the practical knowledge of project managers. Understanding stakeholder actions and influence is essential to achieving project goals.

Keywords: external stakeholders; influence strategies; stakeholder engagement; small hydro power plants; sustainable projects



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1. Introduction

The main cause of global warming is, without a doubt, human activity in the years behind us. Carbon dioxide emissions, which represent the majority of greenhouse gases, were created mostly as a result of burning fossil fuels for energy consumption. The first legally binding international agreement, which was adopted by 196 countries in 2015 and is known as the Paris Agreement, aims to limit global warming by reducing greenhouse gases. Serbia, as one of the signatory countries, ratified the Paris Agreement in 2017 and committed to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions by 9.8%, compared to levels in 1990. It is not a secret that renewable energy sources represent an important way to combat climate change. Knowing that 75% of the EU's greenhouse gases come from the energy sector, it is clear that changes in the energy mix are needed. Same as other Western Balkan countries, Serbia is completely dependent on coal and thermo power plants for electric power. In 2019, coal power plants accounted for 66.4%, while hydro power plants accounted for 28.4% of the total production [1].

In 2013, the ministry in charge of energy affairs adopted the National Renewable Energy Action Plan (NREAP) document, which determines the goals for the use of renewable energy sources by 2020, as well as the way to achieve them. Among other things, this document also aims to encourage investment in renewable energy. Drafting the NREAP resulted from an international obligation—to implement European Renewable Energy Directives—that the Republic of Serbia undertook in 2006 as a Contracting Party to the Energy Community Treaty. In accordance with Directive 2009/28/EC, the Ministerial Council of the Energy Community made the decision to set the binding target at 27% renewable energy sources in Serbia's gross final energy consumption by 2020. NREAP set the targets for each energy sector, including the electricity sector. Small hydro power

plants (SHPPs) were expected to account for 16.2% of the total electricity production from renewable sources by 2020, with an installed capacity of 188 MW [2]. Given that the Serbian legislation encourages private investors to participate in the construction of SHPP, a large number of private companies have expressed interest in this kind of investment. In 2009, the Government of Serbia passed decrees on incentive measures for the electricity production from renewable sources and on the conditions for acquiring the status of a privileged electricity producer, with the aim to create financial incentives for the production of energy from renewable sources. This actually means that investors can acquire the status of privileged power producer, and PE “Elektroprivreda Srbije” is obligated to purchase electricity from privileged producers for the next 12 years, usually at a price twice as high as the market price. These incentive measures, known as feed-in tariffs, are being funded by citizens as a special item in monthly electricity bills.

From the very beginning, SHPP construction projects in Serbia faced numerous problems, which culminated with organized protests by citizens, as well as incidents involving investors and local citizens at many construction locations. Due to a lack of clear regulations or precise plans and the way that the SHPPs were built, the SHPP project in Serbia turned out to be contrary to its original intention, which was to use renewable energy sources in order to preserve the environment. It is safe to say that the Serbian government entered this project relatively unprepared and rather quickly, which had consequences. For any project to be successful, especially a project that involves using a country’s natural resources, public participation at the early stages of planning and design is crucial. Sometimes, the interests of different stakeholders can be conflicting and diverse, which was the case in the Serbian SHPP project. In order to reduce the possibility of conflict situations and to avoid possible project failure, decision-makers should use planning and preparation stages to address such conflicting interests and divergent opinions between stakeholders [3].

The focus of our research was external stakeholders, who were largely overlooked by decision-makers in the early stages of the project lifecycle. External stakeholders are recognized as stakeholders that are “not directly involved in one or more of the lifecycle phases, but rather are affected by the whole project” [4] (p. 507). Motivated by previous work conducted in the domain of stakeholder strategies [5–12], we decided to explore, using a case study approach, the influence strategies that external stakeholders used to try to affect SHPP projects in Serbia. Previous research has mainly focused on public infrastructure and large construction projects. Therefore, we chose to test external stakeholder influence strategies in sustainable projects. Although public infrastructure and large construction projects are known as drivers of economic growth and social development, these projects usually have an adverse effect on the environment and society [13]. Problems related to community displacement and damages to biodiversity and ecosystem are just some of the few negative impacts these large projects have on the environment and society. For instance, projects such as large dams could cause flooding and water pollution [14–17]; construction of roads could lead to erosion, landslide, and deforestation [18]. The community could be affected by these projects as well. There are examples where the local population is exposed to noise and air pollution [19]. With this in mind, there was a strong need to incorporate the social and environmental aspects during project design, planning, and implementation. Probably the most commonly used definition of sustainable development is defined in the Brundtland Report as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” [20]. The sustainability concept in project management started gaining attention in the academic literature over the last few years [21–23]. This concept is often found in the scientific literature related to Triple Bottom Line [24], a concept with three main components supporting sustainable development—economic, environmental, and social. The integration of sustainability principles in project management can be viewed from two different angles [25]: “Sustainability by the project” and “Sustainability of the project” and, in that sense, there is a distinction between “sustainability of project deliverable” and “sustainability of project delivery” [26]. On the one hand, this means that a project’s

objective can focus on delivering something sustainable, whether it is the eco-design of the product [27] or sustainable building materials [28]. On the other hand, the project can take on sustainable project management practices and processes without regard to the final goal; for example, integrating sustainability into the public procurement process [29], developing sustainable supply chain management [30], or green technologies and practices in the construction industry [31–33].

In this paper, environmental groups, non-governmental and non-profit organizations, community groups, and local communities are referred to as external stakeholders. More specifically, the object of our research is external stakeholders who were against the SHPP projects. External stakeholders, in our case, were not identified as important stakeholders, given that they did not hold any of the project's crucial resources. Nevertheless, the case in Serbia shows that external stakeholders can seriously influence the outcome of the project. We argue that the focus of sustainable projects, such as the development of small hydro plants, should not just be to deliver a sustainable solution such as renewable energy but also to integrate the sustainability perspective in project management procedures. The case of SHPPs in Serbia shows that proactive stakeholder participation is the essence of sustainable project management. Therefore, the aims of this paper are: (1) To identify the strategies that external stakeholders used to influence the project and decision-makers; (2) explore the relationships between those strategies; and (3) determine how the negative impact of the SHPP project motivated external stakeholders to intensify the combination of different strategies.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Small Hydro Power Plant

Using hydropower for energy production has a long history. In fact, some sources have claimed that early proofs of using water power date back to the 4th century BC, in the form of waterwheels and watermills [34]. The gradual development of hydropower began in the 19th century and continued rapidly throughout the 20th century. In the period after the Second World War, characterized by worldwide economic expansion, energy demand became higher than ever before. Identified as a cost-effective investment in Western European countries, including Serbia, hydropower plants were public infrastructure projects financed by state-owned companies. Since the 1980s, after the construction of the “Đerdap” hydropower plant, no new projects of this significance were undertaken in Serbia. It is a general opinion that hydropower contributes to sustainability, given that renewable sources of energy contribute to the reduction in GHG and, at the same time, provide electricity to satisfy consumer demand at a relatively low cost, compared to other sources [35].

After the 1960s, large hydropower projects became limited, as most of the suitable locations had already been used, and their social and environmental impact could no longer be neglected [36]. Large hydropower plants (LHPPs) generally require huge up-front capital construction and engineering investment. Additionally, three out of four LHPPs experience budget over-run, up to 96% higher than estimated [37]. Large dam projects are often criticized for their negative impacts, including flooding of large areas, reservoirs releasing GHGs, displacement of population, deforestation, and affecting aquatic and terrestrial biodiversity [14–17]. Taking into consideration all of the above, it is clear that alternatives for LHPPs were needed, and that place was taken by their smaller substitutes. Important EU and world organizations and institutions have strongly supported the use of SHPPs in developing and developed countries due to their many benefits. It was estimated that 75% of future hydropower projects would be SHPPs, given that most large rivers have already been exploited [38]. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization, in their World Small Hydropower Report (2019), emphasized that hydropower contributes to several sustainable development goals. “As the lowest cost renewable energy technology, hydropower remains at the center of international efforts to fight climate change and transition to a clean energy future. Small hydropower (SHP) is an integral part of a

broader strategy to promote development whilst at the same time reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting greater energy independence" [39] (p. 8). By decarbonizing the electricity sector, among other actions defined by Green Deal, Europe strives to become the first climate-neutral continent by 2050. Using renewable sources of energy is an important part of this process and, so far, hydropower has contributed the most to the renewable energy mix in Europe. The International Hydropower Association, in their "2020 Hydropower status report", noted that the development of hydropower had marked stable growth in installed capacity in previous years, with the most recent growth being due to SHPPs [39]. Even in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the hydropower sector has shown a certain amount of resilience and proved to be "clean, reliable and affordable energy" [39].

There is no unique definition of SHPP, and the classification varies from country to country, usually according to power potential. Within the name, mini, micro, and pico SHPPs are sometimes included. In most EU countries, SHPP has a capacity of up to 10 MW. For example, Baltic countries categorize hydro plants with capacity under 10 MW into SHPPs, with micro (up to 100 kW), mini (101 kW–1 MW), and small (1–10 MW) sub-categories [40]. Similarly, India sub-categorizes SHPPs into micro, mini, and small, but with an upper limit of 25 MW [41]. China allows 50 MW installed capacity for small hydro plants [42]. In Serbia, SHPPs are categorized according to their installed capacity—up to 10 MW, as defined by NREAP [2]. However, the opinion of this changed a few years after their original adoption, given that the Energy Law stipulates that an energy entity can acquire the status of a privileged producer of electricity while using hydropower plants with an installed capacity of up to 30 MW [43]. Compared to the EU and other Western Balkan countries, Serbia allows the highest installed capacity, which can potentially cause a significantly greater negative impact on the environment [44]. SHPPs differ according to type, but a major part of them are run-of-the-river plants. This type of SHPP is especially suitable for hilly and mountains areas, where the elevation difference between the weir and powerhouse is notable. That way, theoretically, the amount of water flow and the change in elevation determines how much energy is created by the water: there are a few basic characteristics of these plants, which were presented in the literature. First, a low-elevation dam or weir needs to be constructed, allowing water to accumulate and, then, using a penstock or pipes, divert water to a powerhouse. Second, the diverted water rotates the turbines in the powerhouse, creating electrical energy, which is sent to the system through a transmission line. Third, a trail race is a small channel that moves water back into the watercourse. Finally, these hydro plants are designed to work without a crew—in other words, they are totally automated [45,46].

Although SHPPs are generally considered sustainable projects, their impact on the environment should not be neglected [47,48]. Some authors argued that SHPPs "do not suffer from environmental and social problems" [49] (p. 214) or stated that SHPPs are "cost-effective and environmentally benign" when compared to LHPPs [50] (p. 538). However, a certain number of scientists have different opinions. There is no proof supporting the claim that SHPPs are more eco-friendly than LHPPs [41]. Building an SHPP involves interfering with the natural river flow regime, which was proven to have serious ecological consequences. The authors collected evidence that revealed that the most common adverse effects of SHPPs are: "water depletion downstream of the diversion, water quality deterioration, loss of longitudinal connectivity, habitat degradation, and simplification of the biota community composition" [46] (p. 1). On the contrary, some other findings have revealed that the construction of SHPPs in four rivers in Spain did not adversely affect the water quality and river ecology [51]. Given that SHPPs are built in various locations with unique characteristics, as well as using different construction solutions, turbine types, and power capacity, it is clear that it is important to assess the impact of construction on the environment in the project planning phase [52].

2.2. Stakeholder Influence Strategies

The term stakeholder has assumed an important place in strategic management, as well as other relevant scientific fields, in the last 20 years. Although the stakeholder concept was presented in 1960, by researchers from the Stanford Research Institute [7], only after Freedman's book *Strategic Management: Stakeholder Approach* was published in 1984 did the stakeholder concept start gaining attention worldwide. From the viewpoint of project management, a stakeholder can be a person, group, or organization that has an interest in a particular project, mainly because the project activities or outcome may have a certain impact on them, or they can influence the work or outcome of the project [53]. Fundamental stakeholder classification is based on their formal membership of the project coalition and, in that manner, it is possible to distinguish internal and external stakeholders, where internal stakeholders are considered to usually agree with the project goal and outcome, while external stakeholders are those who may be affected by or affect the project but, in a formal sense, are not part of the project [3,54]. Stakeholders can also be divided into groups, in which sense Henriques and Sadorsky, based on the environmental literature, formed four groups of stakeholders: regulatory, organizational, community, and media [55]. Identifying stakeholders according to their attributes can be carried out using the stakeholder salience model, in which stakeholders are classified by power, legitimacy, and urgency, with the option to have one, two, or three attributes at the same time [56]. Therefore, stakeholders with all three attributes are considered definitive stakeholders who have high salience.

A project manager has the job of ensuring the success of the project and, by considering both project and stakeholder goals, a favorable outcome is more likely to happen [57,58]. Following this fundamental idea within stakeholder management, the two most common stakeholder engagement approaches are [59]: (1) The management of stakeholders approach, which defines stakeholders based on their salience level. Stakeholders with high salience will be given additional attention, and, in the case of conflicting interests between stakeholders, the project values come first [60]. This approach can also be defined as "absolute attention to project values" [61], given that stakeholders are valued according to project contribution, and (2) the management for stakeholders approach, which allows managers to treat stakeholders based on their rights, and not exclusively by the values they contribute to the specific project. Identified also as an approach that gives "absolute attention to stakeholders' values" [61], it allows stakeholders to draw the attention of managers based on the interest they have in the project [62]. The management for stakeholders approach means that managers should welcome all stakeholders and treat them equally, whether they have the potential to harm or help the project [25]. As highlighted in the introduction, there is an obvious dichotomy in the literature between "sustainability by the project" and "sustainability of the project" [25]. Sustainability of the project evolved in sustainable project management was defined by Silvius and Schipper as "the planning, monitoring and controlling of project delivery and support processes, with consideration of the environmental, economical and social aspects of the life-cycle of the project's resources, processes, deliverables and effects, aimed at realizing benefits for stakeholders, and performed in a transparent, fair and ethical way that includes proactive stakeholder participation" [21] (p. 79). In the last couple of years, the number of papers dealing with the concept of sustainable project management has been increasing, where the emphasis is on proactive stakeholder involvement. For example, Eskerod and Huemann argued that "the management-for-stakeholder approach fits the [sustainable] principles better due to the underpinning values, e.g., a strive for fairness and participating of all stakeholders" [60] (p. 41).

While less than deserved attention has been given to the influence strategies of stakeholders in the literature, they represent important tools for stakeholders to achieve their goals. Using the resource dependence theory, Frooman tried to explain how stakeholders behave [63]. The idea behind his work is that the level of dependency in the relationship between the firm and the stakeholder defines the type of stakeholder strategy. A withholding strategy means that the stakeholder deprives the company of the resources it needs until

the company changes its behavior, which can be performed directly or indirectly. When stakeholders provide resources with certain strings attached, they are using a direct usage strategy. If they are using an intermediary to influence the company, then it is an indirect usage strategy. In an empirical study, Hendry made an effort to build on Frooman's typology and described specific stakeholder actions based on environmental NGOs. She identified activities—partnership, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and blockade—as direct strategies and, with the help of allies, stakeholders can use letter-writing, boycotts, shareholder resolution, lobbying, litigation, and communication as indirect strategies [5]. Further, Hendry revealed that stakeholders decide which strategy to use based on different opportunities or experiences, possible partnerships, or due to the fact that some stakeholders have favorite influence strategies. It was also noted that, sometimes, stakeholders utilize actions that give them the most “bang for the buck” [5] (p. 96). Aaltonen et al. built upon Mitchell's salience model in order to determine what types of influence strategies stakeholders use to boost their importance in global projects [8]. According to their findings, stakeholders can increase their power through the use of direct or indirect withholding strategies, resource building strategies, and coalition building strategies. Coalition building strategies allow stakeholders to make alliances and, in that way, increase their legitimacy, which can be achieved with credibility building as well as a communication strategy. A communication strategy, together with a direct action strategy, can increase the urgency of stakeholder's issues. Aaltonen and Kujala went further and chose, for their analysis, secondary stakeholders that are against the project, then observed their influence strategies at each stage of the project [9]. Their study showed that, although it is widely considered that secondary stakeholders have the highest salience in the early stages of a project—the investment stage, in this particular case—stakeholders that were opposed to the project had limited possibilities to react with influence strategies. In the study of Vuorinen and Martinsuo, “value-oriented reasons” served as a decision for stakeholders to use a specific kind of influence strategy in infrastructure projects. The authors discovered that communication strategies, together with rules and supervision, were driven by environmental and social values; complaints, disputes, and decision-making authority strategies by financial value; and communication and decision-making authority by systematic value [10]. Similarly, a group of authors investigated the combinations of strategies that external stakeholders use to influence construction projects [11].

A certain number of studies focused on determining which factors influence the actions of stakeholders based on social movement and social identity theory. Rowley and Moldoveanu tried to predict when stakeholders start their action, and, according to them, urgency is the reason that motivates the mobilization of stakeholders [64]. This was in line with Mitchell et al., who argued that the likeliness of stakeholders mobilization was higher in the presence of an urgency factor [56]. In order to gain influence, stakeholders and target organizations can employ actions such as issue raising, issue suppressing, positioning, and solution-seeking [65]. A group of researchers have explored the dynamics of stakeholder media and established the following stages: First, the stakeholders use social media to criticize their opponents, usually “deforming the language of their adversary”. Then, they take certain actions to spread their message through the media and to mobilize the opposition. After that, the stakeholders surround themselves with allies. Finally, when they have secured the required materials that, through their partners, would show management in a bad light, stakeholders use it for their own media [66] (p. 37).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data for this case study mainly through the use of public sources. Most of the data were collected in electronic form, using the internet. The primary materials used for this research were newspapers articles. Archival materials, such as newspapers, are “particularly suitable for tracing event chronologies, meanings, and discourses over long or very long periods of time” [67] (p. 6). Mills et al. identified archival data as an important

type of material collection for case studies [68]. Newspaper articles, as research data, have multiple advantages, including shortened research time (given that the data were already collected), little resources are needed to collect the data, and researchers can use the data for a longitudinal study. Furthermore, this type of data allows us to freely and publicly discuss the results [69]. It is important to mention that newspaper articles may be biased [70]. In order to keep the bias to a minimum, we included a wide range of different newspapers in our collected data. Archival news articles were successfully used as research data in other case studies [8–10,71,72]. The data for this research were also collected from broadcasted news, interviews on television, and documentaries. Additionally, official documents were obtained in order to increase the validity of our research. Materials were collected from the websites of the ministry in charge of energy affairs and local government units. In the first phase of analysis, we became acquainted with the case by reading the gathered material in order to establish a picture of the main case events and actors. At the same time, based on the collected material, we identified crucial events, as well as the stakeholders engaged and their involvement in these events. Given that the focus of this research was external stakeholders, only the stakeholders that were opposed to the project were selected for the event database. Using the event database, the authors formed a timeline from 2009 to 2021 in order to determine a clear sequence of important events shown in Figure 1. After careful analysis of the collected data, in order to determine the external stakeholders who were against the SHPP projects, it was possible to single out the one stakeholder that stood out the most. This stakeholder was the initiator in most of the important actions related to the project. Therefore, a big part of our analysis was concentrated on strategies organized by this stakeholder.

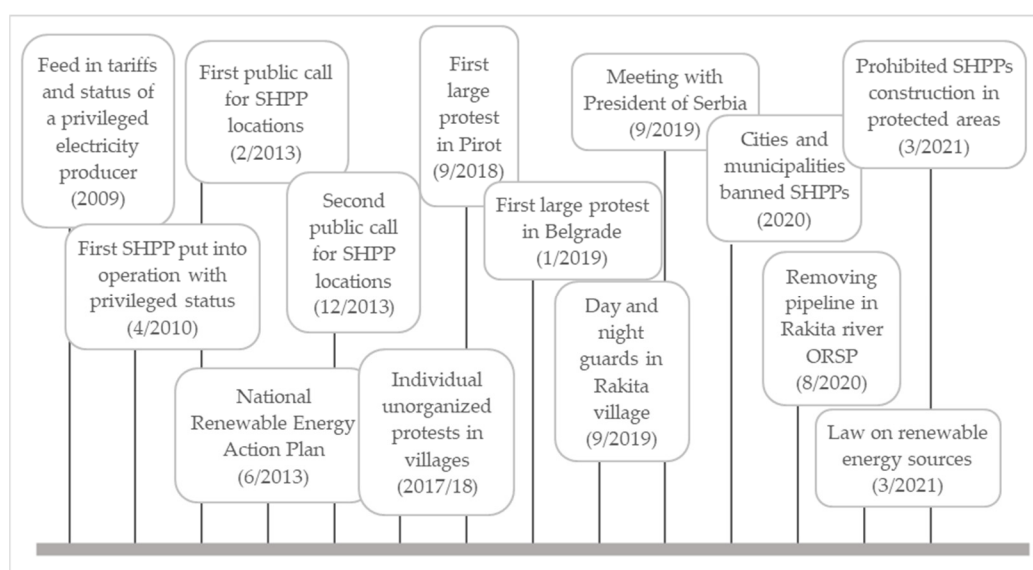


Figure 1. Timeline of main events in SHPP project.

3.2. Methodology

With the purpose of investigating and explain stakeholder influence strategies, we used a qualitative case study research design. A case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the ‘case’) in depth and within its real-world context” [73] (p. 16) and is convenient for examination of the relationships between different stakeholders [74]. Therefore, this specific research approach seemed appropriate for our paper. For this particular case study, we chose different SHPP projects with the purpose of demonstrating which influence strategies stakeholders used to reach their objectives. Cases of different SHPPs were selected based on several criteria—the SHPP cases needed to be widely present in newspapers. Furthermore, we decided to use cases that were most controversial and unique, given that stakeholders were highly motivated in those particular

cases to achieve their goals. Furthermore, in each of these cases, the stakeholders had to use at least two distinctive influence strategies. Finally, the majority of cases selected were those where the investor decided to give up the project or the project was suspended by the authorities.

To develop a stakeholder influence strategies framework, we initially started from the work carried out by previous authors [8–11]. Some of the strategies, such as communication, were found in all papers and were also visible in our data. We singled it out as a separate strategy. “Coalition building” in Aaltonen and Kujala was defined as a strategy where “stakeholders seek to find a favorable position in the project network,” which possibly implies that their allies have political or some other influence on the project. We did not identify this strategy, as such, in our data; therefore, we modified it and named it partnership and capacity-building. The third influence strategy was modified as well, given that Vuorinen and Martinsuo investigated influence strategies utilized by all stakeholders and not just external (i.e., opposed the project), which we considered in our case. Finally, direct action was included in our framework, based on Aaltonen and Kujala as well as Nguyen et al., given that it was identified in our data in its original form. The final framework of influence strategies is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Stakeholder influence strategies framework.

Type of Influence Strategy	Description	Examples
Communication strategy	Stakeholders are reaching a wider audience using media in order to make as many people as possible familiarized with their problems, opinions, and goals.	Updating audience about specific actions through social media. Giving interviews for news. Contacting journals to write stories about the issue. Writing petitions or open letters.
Partnership and capacity-building strategy	Stakeholders form alliances with same-interest groups and gain more followers. Partnerships can be with organizations or individuals.	Using the credibility of partners to reach a wider audience. Respected individuals would support stakeholders in various forms.
Complaints and legal actions	Stakeholders act against the project using legal options. This can be in a formal or informal context.	Locals filing complaints to authorities. Stakeholders intimidating each other with lawsuits. Stakeholders involved in litigation.
Direct action	Stakeholders use various public forms of protest to express their disagreement with the project and achieve their demands.	Organizing blockages, protests, and demonstrations.

To identify the relationship between the negative impact of SHPP projects and the influence strategies used by external stakeholders, we started from the previous work of Vuorinen and Martinsuo, where the authors tested the influence that expected stakeholder project value in infrastructure projects has on the utilization of influence strategies [10]. Given that SHPPs are characterized as a source of sustainable energy, which can contribute to sustainable development, we assume that the expected project value components should be: environmental, social, and financial value. This is in line with the basic sustainability concept, which can be found in the scientific and other literature, as three pillars supporting sustainable development: environmental, social, and economic pillars (informally known

as planet, people, and profit, respectively) [75]. To test these expected project values, we observed them through the prism of negative project impacts against the influence strategies utilized by external stakeholders.

3.3. Case Background Information

With the aim to increase the share of energy from renewable sources in gross energy production, which Serbia has committed to, the government decided to rely mostly on hydro energy in small plants to reach the binding target of 27%. In order to do so, in 2013, the former Ministry of Energy, Development, and Environmental Protection announced two public calls for the allocation of 459 sites for the construction of SHPPs. Considering that certain field conditions are required for the operation of an SHPP, mountain areas and rivers provide perfect opportunities for exploitation. However, a significant number of these locations are in protected areas. It is important to mention that the Law on Nature Protection [76] recognizes three levels of protection and allows limited hydro plant construction in second- and third-level protection areas. This was further specified by the Decree on protection regimes in 2012 [77], allowing the construction of SHPPs with 5 MW capacity in second-level protection and 30 MW in third-level protection areas.

SHPP “Zvonce”, with an installed capacity of 390 kW, is located in Rakita village, Babušnica municipality, within the Nature Park “Stara Planina”. This is the project that created the biggest public outrage, and it represents “a symbol of a struggle against the SHPPs”. The local community and the movement “Defend the rivers of Stara Planina” (ORSP) strongly opposed this project from the beginning. Several controversies followed this project. An environmental impact assessment before the construction of this SHPP was not conducted, even though the Institute for Nature Conservation in-field visit of the location found protected species of fish and crab in the river. Still, the investor had a construction permit, so they continued with the works. Villagers started with protests, which gradually grew into incidents with investor representatives, and the police had to intervene. Due to the great commitment of the local community, municipality construction inspectors and an inspector of the Ministry of Environmental Protection visited the works and found certain irregularities. One of them was the pipeline that was installed within the natural riverbed, which was strictly forbidden by the decision of the Institute for Nature Protection. The inspector ordered the investor to remove the pipeline and return the river to its original condition. Given that the investor did not act in accordance with the inspection order and continued with the construction works, activists of the ORSP movement and locals carried out the action of drilling the pipeline and removing it from the river.

Another location in Serbia that deserved public attention is Jošanička Banja. It is a place known for its healing waters and is located near Nacional Park “Kopaonik”. On the Jošanica river and its tributaries, a total of 17 SHPPs were built from 2013 to date, some of them being within the National Park “Kopaonik”. Local activists from the former Committee for the protection and development of “Jošanička Banja”, who were concerned about the excessive construction of SHPPs, sent a request to the Institute for Nature Conservation, demanding an urgent field visit and inspection. After the inspection, the report (among other things) stated that, during the installation of the pipeline, the thermal mineral spring “Slanci” had been destroyed. The cumulative negative effects were especially pointed out for these SHPPs in Jošanička Banja, within the project “Guidelines for sustainable planning and management of catchment areas of small hydropower plants in protected natural areas” developed by the Faculty of Forestry [78]. The Dean of the Faculty of Forestry, together with his associates, visited 46 locations where SHPPs were built, among which were those on Jošanica river, and concluded the following: Several facilities (SHPPs) did not have a water intake structure, whereas water was carried by pipelines from one powerhouse to the next, which resulted in one-third of the river length being captured in pipelines. Fish passages were, in most cases, non-functional or closed by investors with the idea to divert as much water as possible through the pipeline to the powerhouse, and this kind of construction solution had various negative effects on the

aquatic ecosystem, such as a drastic reduction in river trout numbers and other species. Locals from villages in this area, who also witnessed this negligent conduct, organized multiple protests and blockages of local roads in order to stop the investors from entering the construction sites. Their concerns were confirmed with the inspection report, stating that building permits for three SHPPs were issued without appropriate conditions from the Institute for Nature Conservation, while one SHPP (“Županj”) was built despite the fact that the project had negative conditions from the same Institute.

The commitment of the activists and local community, together with public pressure, led the Ministry of Environmental Protection to change its decision about the construction of SHPPs “Pakleštica” and “Karaula”. Both SHPPs are located in protected areas: Nature Park “Stara Planina” and Special Nature Reserve “Goč-Gvozdac”. The Ministry of Environmental Protection initially gave consent to the environmental impact assessment study and changed its decision after some time. The Minister talked about this issue, claiming that the Institute for Nature Conservation gave a positive opinion as well, and it was only later determined that protected species live in these rivers. The case of SHPP “Pakleštica” ended up in court, where the investor sued the Ministry for changing its decision. The administrative court ruled in favor of the investor but, then, the Supreme court annulled this judgment and upheld the decision of the Ministry banning the construction of the SHPP.

These are just a few cases of many, but they illustrate the problem of SHPP projects in Serbia in the best manner. It is important to mention that, in the last two years, decision-makers have slowly started to change their attitudes toward this project. The results of opposed stakeholders struggling are visible not just in a single SHPP case but also in the SHPPs project in general. Several cities and municipalities have completely banned the construction of SHPPs. In 2021, the Serbian government passed a law on renewable energy sources [79], which prohibits the construction of small hydropower plants in protected areas. Feed-in tariffs, which were also criticized by opposed stakeholders, were replaced with auctions. Additionally, the Minister of Mining and Energy stated that all built SHPPs will be “checked and revised”.

4. Results

In almost all of the abovementioned projects, at least two strategies were used by stakeholders to oppose the project; however, given that the fight against SHPPs is not focused on just a single project in a specific village (although, in most of the cases, it started that way), it is hard to separate influence strategies according to the location of SHPPs. Accordingly, in this section, influence strategies are presented with examples, sometimes aimed at a specific SHPP project and sometimes for the SHPP project in general. Table 2 presents a summary of influence strategies used, as determined in our case.

The communication strategy was largely used by the ORSP movement. They used press releases, mostly through social media and their website, to communicate with other stakeholders and decision-makers. In one of these cases, they demanded the Director of public service media to organize a live television program with relevant ministers and, in that way, inform the people of Serbia of the governmental plans for SHPPs. The ORSP wrote to television show editors as well, with the request for media space on a national television program, and, as a result, two popular tv shows dedicated to SHPPs were broadcasted. Their continuous efforts to communicate with authorities, together with public pressure, finally resulted in their meeting with the President of the Republic of Serbia. Representatives of ORSP, together with the Dean of Faculty of Forestry, led the President to agree to make a proposal to the government with the idea to prohibit the construction of SHPPs in protected areas. A communication strategy to influence the project was also used by experts and members of the academic community, who individually fought against the construction of SHPPs. In an open letter addressed to the Minister of Environmental Protection, signed by the Dean of Faculty of Forestry, Dean of Faculty of Biology, Dean of Faculty of Geography, Dean of Faculty of Mining and Geology, and Director of Institute for

Biological Research, it was indicated that there are better solutions for the development of Serbia's energy system than the SHPP project. The signatories pointed out that the construction of SHPPs, especially in Nature Park "Stara Planina", served to destroy the few remaining valuable resources, namely, clean mountain rivers.

Table 2. Stakeholder influence strategies applied in our case study.

Type of Influence Strategy	Actions
Communication strategy	<p>Movement ORSP started as a Facebook group, which now has about 150,000 members.</p> <p>An open letter was sent to the Minister of Environmental Protection, signed by four Deans from relevant faculties.</p> <p>Representatives of ORSP, together with the Dean of Faculty of Forestry, met with the President of Republic of Serbia and Minister of Energy to discuss the SHPP issue.</p> <p>Villagers regularly sent petitions to local and state government institutions to stop the projects.</p> <p>Movement ORSP fought for a large media presence, including TV news and special programs.</p>
Partnership and Capacity—building strategy	<p>The villagers were spontaneously joined by other people from different places. For example, in the protest in Rakita village (located in south Serbia), people came from all around the country to give support.</p> <p>Movement ORSP allied with the Dean of Faculty of Forestry, who actively opposed the SHPP projects.</p> <p>Villages allied with RERI and ORSP, who offered them legal help.</p>
Complaints and legal actions	<p>Sending official complaints to the government or local institutions, indicating the illegality of the proceedings during the project.</p> <p>RERI filed a criminal complaint and a request for misdemeanor proceedings against some of the investors.</p> <p>Investors filed different kinds of charges against activists and villagers, for example, charges relating to destroying private property or assaults. In response, RERI and ORSP provided legal representation to the local community.</p> <p>Some NGOs (RERI, Riverwatch, EuroNatur, and ClientEarth) filed an official complaint to the Energy Community against the Serbian Government.</p>
Direct action	<p>Multiple protests were organized at site locations or in cities.</p> <p>The residents of Stara Planina mountain organized "day and night guards" in villages, disabling investors from entering the locations and starting construction work.</p> <p>The ORSP movement called people to join them in "labor action": Removing pipelines from the Rakita river, as well as "saving" Rudinjska river.</p>

A partnership is an important strategy utilized by stakeholders, which was also identified in our case. Stakeholders can increase the effectiveness of communication strategies by forming partnerships with expert individuals. In our case, the ORSP movement allied with the Dean of Faculty of Forestry, who gave their demands higher credibility. Stakeholders who were opposed the SHPP project formed partnerships and acted together. The moment the wider public was informed about the actions taken against the construction of SHPPs in the Nature Park "Stara Planina", and the negative effects they have on the environment and local community, people from different places in Serbia came and joined the ORSP movement. Thus, the effect of capacity-building strategy intensified through the use of a proper communication strategy. Additionally, the ORSP used their social media profiles to spread their messages and mobilize the opposition in order to build larger capacity: "Look at your electricity bill! You pay the privileged rich man to steal your river."

In a few protests organized in villages, there was a conflict between investors and locals. As a result, criminal and misdemeanor charges were filed against some activists from local communities. The RERI (Renewables and Environmental Regulatory Institute), an NGO and NPO, hired a legal team to defend the activists before competent courts. One of the activists from the alliance of local communities ("Stara Planina") said he had "over 100 misdemeanor charges for harassment of public order and peace". Additionally, RERI filed criminal and misdemeanor charges against some investors who were suspected of not obeying the law. Several building permits for SHPPs had ceased to be valid, in which case, local community activists, with RERI's help, notified the competent municipalities in order to make an official decision determining that the building permit had expired. The partnership with RERI actually made it possible for local activists to fight against the project with legal actions, as well as having legal support when needed.

Multiple protests against the SHPPs were organized across the country in these seven years. However, protests and citizen resistance intensified in the last three years, when the ORSP movement started organizing various actions, first in their hometown and then in capital cities. "I want rivers, I don't want pipelines", "Rivers are life", and "You have permits. We have the right" are just a few of the many slogans used in protests. Several times, locals and activists carried out blockades of the construction site with the intention to disable investors from starting with the works. Locals organized "day and night guards," and banned anyone from entering the village. In some cases, there were violent clashes between investors and locals. One event was of particular importance in the stakeholder's struggle. The ORSP movement announced that, as "labor action," they were removing the pipeline from the Rakita river. This action was announced several times during the protest and on social media. Representatives of ORSP invited people to join them, with the strong message, "If the government does not take appropriate steps, the people will take matters into their own hands". A large number of people from different parts of the country gathered in Rakita village and destroyed the pipeline in the river. Similarly, an unknown investor started preparatory works in Rudinjska river, one of the SHPP locations. As a result, the river dried up. The ORSP movement organized the action of "saving the Rudinjska river," in order to return it to its natural bed. In this particular case, the local community revolted, considering that preparatory works had begun without a properly marked construction site with information about the investor or building permit. The citizen's initiative "Save the mountain rivers of Kraljevo", inspired by the actions of the ORSP movement, organized placement of red signs on six locations on river Lopatnica. The red signs served as a "warning" for future investors, letting them know they are not welcome.

Analyzing the data, we noticed that negative project impacts drove stakeholders to express their dissatisfaction using different influence strategies; however, the intensity of combination between different strategies depended on the negative effect created by the project. The intensity of used strategies and their relationship to influence decision-makers and the project itself, based on the negative impact of the project, is shown in Table 3. In our case, the negative impacts that the SHPPs had on the environment was the most frequent value that motivated stakeholders to oppose the project. Stakeholders used combinations of all four strategies to influence the projects, driven by their negative effects on the environment.

Stakeholders' social media was frequently updated in order to inform followers about situations related to the specific places where SHPPs were installed. Members of the ORSP posted various photos from the field, such as photos of riverbeds without any water, which caused the destruction of the river ecosystem. Direct actions planned and announced by the ORSP and locals on social media were very much devoted to the correction of the negative effects on nature. Some of the actions, such as returning the river to its natural bed and removing the pipeline from the riverbed, illustrate the environmental values that drove the stakeholders to use direct strategies to influence decision-makers. These actions were broadcasted on stakeholder's media first but were very soon caught

by traditional media, which enabled the stakeholders to build a greater capacity of people who were willing to fight against the destruction of nature. With the intention to draw attention to the negative effects of SHPPs, members of the academic community sent an open letter to the Minister of Environmental Protection, in which they explained, among other things, the consequences for protected species in rivers due to the construction of SHPPs. More precisely, they stated that “brown trout is not a migratory species and does not use fish pathways”; therefore, fish pathways installed within SHPPs are useless in those particular cases. As mentioned earlier, a couple of experts gave the ORSP and locals their support in protest, taking an active role as speakers with the intention to raise awareness about the destruction of natural resources and the environment. Stakeholders regularly sent complaints and requests demanding extraordinary inspection. In most cases, they expressed concern about the legality of the procedure for issuing construction permits; more precisely, the part that refers to compliance with all regulations related to natural protection. In many cases, partnerships with other environmental groups made it possible for locals to have legal options on their side.

Table 3. Relationship intensity between used strategies, based on negative impact of projects.

Relationship	Environmental	Social	Financial
Communication—Direct action	High	High	Medium
Partnership and capacity-building—Communication	High	High	-
Complaints and legal actions—Partnership and capacity-building	Medium	-	-
Direct action—partnership and capacity-building	High	Medium	-

In our analyzed data, we identified the negative social impact which drove stakeholders to mostly use communication strategies, together with partners and direct actions. Locals mainly complained, through media, of their endangered social position. One of the villagers said that, as an SHPP was installed near their house, they had experienced water shortages and loud noises. In a couple of cases, construction works triggered landslides, making everyday life for members of the local community difficult; for instance, a local road became blocked. Some of the experts pointed out the problems that members of local communities faced and concluded that, among other things, the construction of SHPPs “disturbs the level of water in riverbed which it directly affects the drying up of local springs and endangers the water supply of the population”. In one TV report, which covered the night guards and road blockage by stakeholders, one of the locals stated that she could not feed her cattle, as the river near her house had dried up. While the negative financial impact of the SHPP project is surely present, we did not find much evidence in our data that stakeholder strategies were directly driven by negative financial value. This is probably because the subject of our research was external stakeholders that were opposed the project and who were not formally in the project network. Nevertheless, one negative financial impact created by the SHPP project was feed-in tariffs. ORSP, on a couple of occasions, strongly criticized this method, stating that citizens were financing private investors to destroy their rivers.

5. Discussion

Figure 2 shows the influence strategies that external stakeholders utilized in our case study and their relationships. We believe that communication together with partnership and capacity-building strategies led stakeholder claims to have a greater influence on decision-makers. Previous works have confirmed that communication strategies are used to attract allies and encourage them to pressure the management [5,11]. In our case, stakeholders used communication strategies to mobilize larger opposition and create a partnership

with other opposed groups. In this way, the stakeholders had better chances to be heard by decision-makers, creating a united opposition. The loudest opposed stakeholder, the ORSP movement, started as a Facebook group with the intention of informing people about the harmfulness of the SHPP project. In less than a year, the group had near 150,000 members. Stakeholder media represents a powerful tool for capacity-building, given that it allows stakeholders to reach people who share their opinion faster and to communicate with them in real-time [66]. Partnering with certain individuals who have a good reputation in society can help stakeholders to gain a stronger influence on decision-makers and, thus, a greater probability of achieving their goals [11]. Based on the results from our case, the effects of partnership with a credible individual or community are quite noticeable. Members of the academic community supported the locals in their fight, communicating through various media about the negative environmental impacts the SHPP project produced. They provided credibility to stakeholder demands, offering important evidence of the detrimental effect on wildlife in rivers. Therefore, we propose the following: “Communication strategy increases the impact of partnership and capacity-building and, vice versa, partnership and capacity-building intensify the effects of communication strategy.”

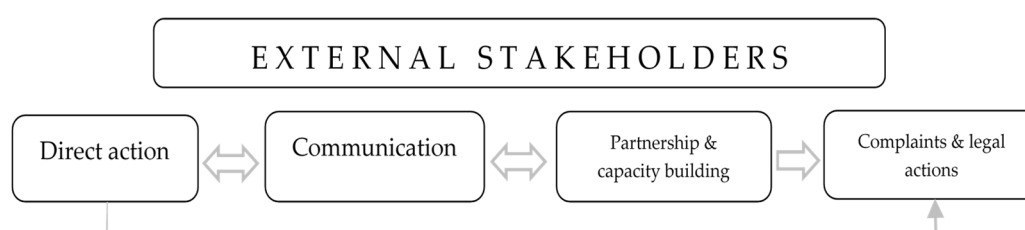


Figure 2. Relationship between influence strategies.

Resources have an important role in the struggle of stakeholders. To pursue a specific strategy, stakeholders need to have a certain number of resources available. According to previous work, the mobilization of stakeholders depends on the material (work, money, concrete benefits, services) and/or non-material resources (authority, moral engagement, faith, friendship) [80]. In some selected cases, the locals did not have enough knowledge about legal options and the project in general, which put them at a disadvantage, even at the beginning of their complaints. Likewise, the locals had several clashes with investors, which resulted in criminal and misdemeanor charges. In this way, the local population was exposed to pressure from the investors due to charges, as well as material pressure because of the fines. RERI helped the local population by providing legal representation in different proceedings before courts, as well as taking other legal actions, such as sending different kinds of requests and complaints to competent institutions. ORSP also helped by raising money to fund lawsuits against locals and activists. This particular case shows that allies provided important resources to stakeholders that they lacked and, thus, increased their chances of achieving the conceived objective. Bearing that in mind, we propose that: “Partnership and capacity-building intensify the effects of complaints and legal actions.”

The case of SHPPs showed us that stakeholders actively used their media to communicate with their partners and to build capacity. The previous work of Hunter et al. showed the links between stakeholder media, capacity-building, and activist momentum [66]. Protests and radical actions proved to be quite effective tools for attracting media attention and producing publicity, which resulted in other opposed parties joining the movement [65]. For example, in our case, stakeholders actively used their Facebook group (and, later, their website) to inform the public of their past and future direct actions against the SHPP project. Additionally, sometimes the activists uploaded videos and pictures live from the protest or roadblocks, which the regular media picked up and shared further. “Labor action” organized by ORSP was announced a couple of times in their media, which resulted in successful direct action. Not only people from different parts of the country came to participate, but the movement attracted mainstream media attention and gained

wider popularity. The citizen initiative “Save the mountain rivers of Kraljevo” said they were inspired by the fight of locals and activists from “Stara Planina”, when they decided to take certain actions against the SHPP project. Several movements and initiatives across Serbia dealing with environmental protection joined together for cooperation, with the goal of full connection at the national level. Hence, we propose that: “Communication strategy intensifies the impact of direct actions, while direct action uses communication as a mediator for partnership and capacity-building.”

The connection between the concept of project value and stakeholder influence strategies was studied previously [10–12], focusing mainly on construction projects. The results of our research demonstrated that the negative impact derived from SHPP projects influenced the behavior of external stakeholders. The interconnectedness of communication and direct action was driven mostly by the negative impact of the projects on the environment. Similarly, direct action and partnership had high relationship intensity based on environmental value. Our case also showed that social and environmental impacts intensified partnership–legal actions as well as the communication–partnership relationship. This kind of behavior can be explained by the fact that locals started to oppose the project only after the construction works had begun and the adverse effects of the SHPPs became visible. Nevertheless, it is interesting that locals were united in their fight to save the rivers, more than complaining about their changed living conditions. Therefore, we make the following proposition: “Project negative environmental (and social) impacts drive external stakeholders to intensify the use of different influence strategies.”

Reviewing some of the previous literature, we found that influence strategy selection is determined by the “balance of power implied by resource relationship” between stakeholders [63] (p. 203). For example, stakeholders will choose coercion strategies when their dependence on the firm is low [81], leveraging resource flow directly or with the help of an ally. In our case, relating to the SHPP project, members of the community held no crucial project resource, but, interestingly, those stakeholders were the most active in protests and roadblocks. With the help from their allies—environmental groups—communities defended the rivers using direct action strategies, which ultimately resulted in several victories for the activists and villagers when investors gave up the projects due to uncertainty regarding further investments. The ORSP movement was the loudest stakeholder when it came to utilizing direct actions. They organized the communities for roadblocks and partnered with credible individuals who lent them support in protests. After several of these direct actions, it seems that stakeholders made significant progress in their fight. For example, the ORSP complained, through media, that nobody from the government had agreed to meet with them and hear their problems for almost three years; however, when direct actions intensified and media coverage rose, the President of Serbia agreed to meet with the activists. This is in line with previous research carried out by Lin et al., where it was concluded that communities, NGOs, and the public are more likely to use aggressive strategies than powerful stakeholders [12]. Therefore, we can assume that stakeholder resource dependence does not necessarily determine the stakeholder power and propose the following: “The less resources external stakeholders hold, the more aggressive influence strategies they use.”

In our case, considering the SHPP project, external stakeholders were largely overlooked during the planning and decision-making phase. One of the possible reasons why this happened is they did not hold any project resources and, consequently, the project managers thought they could not affect the project performance. Another important fact is that several opposed initiatives and movements, among which was the most influential ORSP, did not exist before the project but arose as a result of the struggle against the SHPPs. The external stakeholders in the analyzed case begun intensive opposition against the project only in the implementation phase. This was due to the fact that members of the local community were not informed in time—while the project was still in the preparation phase—mainly because they were not identified as important stakeholders from the project managers perception; however, there were several testimonies from locals claiming that

they were misinformed about the projects in their villages (SHPPs were presented by the local government as being like modern watermills), which is why they only reacted when the construction works had begun.

It is clear, from our case, that although external stakeholders did not hold any of the project's crucial resources, they were able to affect the project through the use of different influence strategies. In several cases, the opposed stakeholders prevented the investors from entering the construction site and starting with the works, using direct actions such as road blockage until the investors' building permit expired. Affected by these negative experiences, a certain number of investors gave up their projects without even trying to begin with the works, fearing the reaction of local community members. With help from their allies, locals used legal options that helped them discover irregularities in the work of governmental bodies, which, in some cases, led to the revocation of the building permit. Stakeholders also formed partnerships with other opposed groups and respected individuals, who lent extra credibility to their claims which, together with media presence, resulted in greater opposition capacity.

The importance of stakeholder engagement in project management practice is widely known and cannot be disputed. However, there are examples of when poor stakeholder management leads to "conflicts and controversies about the implementation" of a specific project [6] (p. 321). To avoid negative impacts on the expected performance of a project, project managers should try to recognize stakeholder concerns and resolve any conflicting interests through the use of open dialogue [61]. To ensure the successfulness of a project, engagement with all relevant stakeholders is needed, while agile leaders must be prepared to listen, communicate, and interact [82–84]. Given that the list of stakeholder groups in sustainable projects is usually not just different, when compared to "traditional" projects, but also more comprehensive, project managers have a complicated and responsible task [85,86]. Different levels of stakeholder engagement, such as stakeholder involvement and participation, can enhance their acceptance of a project [87]. Equally important is identifying local needs and conditions while applying efficient and effective project management strategies [88].

From a managerial perspective, this case can be characterized as an example of poor project management. It is now clear that Serbia did not fulfill its obligation; that is, 27% of renewable energy sources in its gross final energy consumption by 2020. According to the last Progress Report on the Implementation of the NREAP, from 2009 to December 2020, only 121 SHPPs were built, with an installed capacity of 77 MW [89]. Compared to the goal set in NREAP [2], where the installed capacity was set to 188 MW, our conclusion is that the SHPP project in Serbia failed. The great part of this failure can be attributed to poor stakeholder engagement. At the beginning of the project, locals and other external stakeholders were either identified as powerless stakeholders who cannot affect the project outcome or were not identified as stakeholders at all. As mentioned previously, this is probably due to the fact that they did not hold any project resources and because some stakeholders did not exist as organized groups before the project execution phase. Nevertheless, our case study showed that external stakeholders could significantly affect the project outcome through the use of different influence strategies. Vital information for project managers is not to underestimate the power of external stakeholder influence. While stakeholder identification in the early project stages is important, reassessment is sometimes required as the project progresses in order to manage the stakeholders properly. As the SHPP project progressed, external stakeholders became more visible and organized; however, they did not receive proper attention from managers, even though they tried to communicate with them before using some extreme direct actions. The decision-makers stayed silent, forcing external stakeholders to intensify the utilization of influence strategies. Before locals started with protests and roadblocks, the project managers could have communicated through different channels in order to get through to the opposed stakeholders and control the damage to the project. It is important to mention that, in some cases, certain irregularities were present in the formal construction SHPP procedure, which

actually motivated external stakeholders to fight for their claims even harder. The official institutions largely responded by shifting responsibility from one to the other, allowing external stakeholders to use this to their advantage. While the implementation phase of the project was seen by previous researchers as the stage when external stakeholders had limited options to influence [9], our case proves that, when construction works had begun, and the impacts of the project became more evident, the locals and activists were more determined to stop the project. The project execution stage was the period when external stakeholders intensified their influence strategies in order to achieve their goals. Although the execution phase is typically characterized by the irreversibility of decisions, the external stakeholders, in our case, achieved several revocations from official institutions. For example, they influenced the Ministry of Environmental Protection, which resulted in the revocation of previous agreements to build SHPPs. Furthermore, external stakeholders influenced the decision-makers, which resulted in the following actions: several cities and municipalities completely banned the construction of SHPPs, and a new law was passed in early 2021, which prohibits the construction of SHPPs in protected areas.

It is important to touch upon the fact that stakeholders who were against the SHPPs were mostly motivated by the negative environmental effects derived from these projects. This is especially interesting, considering that awareness of environmental protection in Serbia is not very high [90]. Therefore, it could be expected that external stakeholders engage in various actions against the project only when their lives are disturbed. Although in our case, locals complained about their living conditions being negatively affected by the construction of SHPP, this research demonstrated that environmental values are the main reason why the external stakeholders decided to actively oppose the project. We also revealed that external stakeholders bonded over the project's negative impacts on the environment and eventually gained the support of the general public, thus emphasizing the harmfulness of the SHPP project to the environment. The latest large protest, "Ecological uprising," organized in April 2021 in Belgrade, addressed other pressing environmental issues in Serbia, besides the problem of SHPPs. This protest could be proof that the awareness of ecology is changing in Serbia but, more importantly, that external stakeholders, taken by their previous victory, will continue to fight against other projects in the future, which should be taken into account by project managers and decision-makers. Nevertheless, these claims call for additional research.

As previously mentioned, the future of projects and their success lies in their sustainability, how they manage the project's resources, what are the effects on society, what impact the project has on the environment, and what economic consequences the project creates for the community. Suppose we opt for sustainable project management, which implies the sustainability of project management processes and the final product, focusing on local resources and working practices, human rights, consumers, ethical behavior, natural resources and energy consumption, transportation, local procurement, as well as business agility and economic prosperity. In that case, a proper stakeholder strategy is crucial for providing a sustainable project. Infrastructure projects that use huge resources [91] should particularly strive to be sustainable and meet all the aspects of sustainability, regardless of the complexity level. Accepting sustainability as an imperative inevitably leads to more professional project management and adds value to the traditional infrastructure projects management approaches.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore what specific strategies that external stakeholders used in order to influence decision-makers and, ultimately, satisfy their goals. Furthermore, we investigated the interconnectedness of these influence strategies in sustainable projects. Motivated by previous work conducted in the domain of stakeholder strategies, we tested the negative impacts of these sustainable projects against the influence strategies in order to detect the intensity of stakeholder attempts to affect the project. We found that negative effects on the environment drove stakeholders to intensify their different

influence strategies. Finally, five propositions were derived as a result of our research. For the purpose of this study, we developed an original framework of external stakeholder influence strategies in sustainable projects. Based on a case study including SHPP projects in Serbia, four different stakeholder influence strategies were identified: communication, partnership and capacity-building, complaints and legal actions, and direct action.

Our research contributes to the existing stakeholder engagement literature, where more attention was devoted to the managerial, rather than stakeholder, side. Previous research in the domain of stakeholder influence strategies has focused on large infrastructure and construction projects, which makes this paper the first to address stakeholders in sustainable projects. Understanding the actions of stakeholders against projects, as well as their connection and intensity, can help managers to achieve their project goals. The findings of our research show that less powerful stakeholders, without the possession of project-crucial resources, can still greatly affect the project outcome. While it is generally considered that external stakeholders have the best chance to alter the project in early stages, such as planning and designing, our case proves the opposite. Consequently, the project implementation phase created negative impacts, which drove stakeholders to fight for their goals through intensifying their influence strategies.

Nonetheless, our research had limitations. The first is the data used, considering that we obtained most of the data from publicly available sources, such as newspapers articles. There is the possibility of journalist and newspapers bias in terms of the selection of events and stories that are covered, as well as the way in which these stories are written. In order to enhance the validity of the data, we used a large number of different newspapers together with broadcast and digital media and official government documents. The second shortcoming is actually the subject of this research: external stakeholders. We focused only on external stakeholders that were against the project. Given that external stakeholders, in our case, started opposing the SHPPs only when the construction works had begun, this brings us to the next limitation of our study. We investigated stakeholder influence strategies only in the project execution phase. Finally, our initial framework was affected by our case, which led us to the opinion that some other type of project (or, possibly, the same type of project but in a different country) could derive a different categorization.

It is important to emphasize, at this point, that the major theoretical contribution of this paper is that we have shown that not all stakeholder management strategies are adequate in terms of project sustainability. Therefore, approaches that include all of the stakeholders should be considered appropriate in these cases. Most stakeholder management strategies do not recognize the aforementioned limitations; hence, future theoretical developments should aim to strengthen the sustainability aspect in the multi-stakeholder objective setting process. That being said, further research could cover different types of sustainability projects (e.g., wind power plants) or similar SHPP projects in different countries. Furthermore, future research could study other stakeholders during the different stages of the project, not just in the implementation phase. Additionally, archival data could be replaced with data obtained through interviews with stakeholders or from questionnaires, in which case the results could differ from the results presented herein.

If we adopt the main findings of this article—that all of the stakeholders should be adequately involved from the early project planning phases—and keeping in mind the case studies used for this research, it is obvious that the objectives of the project could be changed drastically, in comparison to the initial idea of the investor; perhaps even leading to the abandonment of a project as it is. Hence, the sincere involvement of the stakeholders in the project initiation phase could be, to some extent, considered gambling with an uncertain outcome. Therefore, the title of this paper points out that this approach should be considered as a “throw of the dice,” as no one can predict the result of the suggested approach. We have proven, in this paper, and strongly advocate that the opposite approach—that is, not taking all of the stakeholder’s interests into account—could lead to a complete project fiasco and, so, it should never be an option for successful project management.

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