

## Research paper

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# Exploring the social legitimacy of urban road PPPs in Nigeria

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**Abstract:** Public–private partnerships (PPPs) have become an effective and efficient contractual agreement between the state and the private sector for providing infrastructure services. Yet, their social acceptance and legitimacy are questionable. Communities accept such changes to their social contract with the government only if the PPPs are perceived to be legitimate as public institutions are not trusted by the communities. As a result, the disappointments and controversial under-performance of PPPs in Nigeria, like most developing countries, have been generally associated with community opposition due to any agency or competence-related failure. Hence, the need for this study. Drawing on data from two urban road PPPs in Nigeria, we identify the following three deeply internalised shared beliefs that shape a community group’s perceptions and attitudes towards an infrastructure built by PPPs in their neighbourhood: the public services should be provided for free, PPPs are created mainly to serve perceived ‘corrupt’ politicians and public institutions are not effective and efficient in service delivery. These beliefs, combined with the community’s structural power, explain why some community groups oppose (or support) infrastructure PPPs within their proximity, and the growing legitimacy challenge PPPs face. Our paper in this regard provides a guidance for designing effective and targeted community engagement strategies for PPP projects and contributed to PPP stakeholder management and mainstream stakeholder management research.

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## 1 Introduction

Public–private partnerships (PPPs) have become an effective and efficient contractual agreement between the state and the private sector and are used by the government to provide urban transport infrastructure such as inter-state roads, rails and bridges that are critical to the inclusive development of communities and regions where they are built (Ward et al. 2018). As a result, a synergy between the government, private sector partner and community stakeholders (who are the end-users or impacted by the project) is a sine qua non for success and better outcomes for all (Alford and Yates 2016). Yet, many impacted communities are dissatisfied with the way certain projects have been proposed or delivered (Owolabi et al. 2019; Toriola-Coker et al. 2021). Achieving social legitimacy remains a challenge and has been reported as one of the main reasons for the failure of PPPs (Cui et al. 2018, p. 15), especially in developing countries like Nigeria (Leigland 2018).

For instance, Toriola-Coker et al. (2021) studied critical success factors for motivating end-user stakeholders’ support for PPPs in Nigeria and attributed the prevailing PPP legitimacy challenge to the divergence between community expectations and the normative value encoded in the PPP. Accordingly, legitimacy lies in ‘the perceptions of the audience (communities) and not the normative goodness of an institution (infrastructure PPP), although the latter may influence whether the audience regard an institution’s exercise of authority as more or less appropriate’ (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, p. 585). In other words, legitimacy is built on ‘formal and informal rules that are justifiable in terms of shared beliefs’ (Nixon et al. 2017, p. 17) within a society or community group, which subsequently influences their perception or attitude towards engagement and support for a PPP.

Although research and practice in infrastructure PPP and project management recognise the link between social legitimacy and community engagement, these works do not explore in detail how stakeholder legitimacy perception is formed and the factors that influence the audience (community groups) who grant the ambiguous legitimacy (Witz et al. 2021). Current research and practice tend to relate legitimacy to external qualities such as community empowerment, inclusiveness, participation, or equality (Derakhshan et al. 2019). Yet, in reality, these qualities are context-specific and are therefore influenced by shared beliefs embedded in different groups or environments. As a result, Witz et al. (2021, p. 377) ‘suggested stronger local embeddedness of (infrastructure) projects to increase their legitimacy’. However, despite this suggestion and the growing importance of the social acceptance of infrastructure PPPs, research on the embeddedness of infrastructure PPPs in the broader institutional context is relatively scant (Söderlund and Sydow 2019). In particular, we know little about how shared beliefs (that are socially constructed) shape community groups’ attitudes, perceptions and motivation to support or oppose an infrastructure PPP. To that end, we formulated the following research question: *What are the shared beliefs that influence a community group’s perception and attitude towards an urban infrastructure PPP built within their proximity?*

To answer the research question, we conceptualise the aspects of the ‘community group’ and ‘shared belief’ in this paper as follows: Firstly, we define community as a collective of multiple individuals, tied to a common geographical area, who are conscious of and perceive themselves as members of a group in the context of a socio-economic issue that affects or is affected by them (Bhaskara 2015; Schneider and Sachs 2017). Based on this definition, we considered the following groups as community (stakeholder) groups in this study: residents and community groups, developers and business owners, and other groups that use or are impacted by the infrastructure like drivers’ unions or groups in the case of an urban transport infrastructure.

Secondly, we defined shared beliefs as agreed upon or widely held expectations about public institutions’ performance, by which a community group member judges the legitimacy of state action or policy in any given situation. In this regard, ‘expectation’ is a ‘forward-looking belief’ that entails time probabilities around an uncertain state of affairs. It is about what is going to happen and presumes continuity between the past and the present or future. Therefore, the process of constructing shared beliefs draws heavily on information that is salient in the local context. In this manner, shared beliefs are transient and can vary widely across community groups in an

infrastructure project. For example, a group of drivers may be more favourable to a tolled road than a group of residents or market women. Following this understanding, we selected and analysed two urban road infrastructure PPPs in Nigeria to address the research question. The two selected cases amplify the challenge of gaining legitimacy in infrastructure PPPs. Firstly, both were tolled roads in the same urban area of Lagos, Nigeria. Secondly, each faced a different level of community resistance.

The study identified the following three shared beliefs in Nigeria that underpin the general apathy towards PPPs: public services should be provided free for all; clientelism, a belief that PPP projects are created mainly to serve perceived ‘corrupt’ politicians; public institutions are inefficient and not competent to deliver quality services. In addition, we also identified a community’s structural power and the type of infrastructure as situational factors that can mediate shared beliefs. Following this introduction, we will provide a literature review that focuses on legitimacy and the defining features and dimensions of shared beliefs. In the sections that follow, we present our theoretical framework, research methodology and results, and we discuss their implications for research and practice. In the last section, we present our concluding thoughts and future research.

## 2 Background literature

### 2.1 The legitimacy of infrastructure PPP

At its root, (political) legitimacy describes a situation where citizens ‘believe in the state’s right to rule over them and are willing to defer to it’ (McCloughlin 2015, p. 2). Suddaby et al (2017, p. 24) described legitimacy as a social process that is ‘actively and continually negotiated’ () with the public. This means that a significant portion of impacted stakeholders must confer legitimacy on an object (institution) for it to become legitimate to the public (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012). This concern is especially salient in PPPs (Cui et al. 2018) for a number of reasons. Firstly, infrastructure projects rarely go uncontested due to their potential impact on the local community wherein they are built (Mišić and Radujković 2015). Secondly, by transferring the responsibility for the provision of infrastructure services to the private sector, PPPs alter the pre-existing contract ‘between the state and society on their mutual roles and responsibilities’ (OECD 2017, p. 77). The social contract explicitly and implicitly details the myriads of values expected by a society from the state’s institutions, actions and policies (Olateju et al. 2021). Explicit terms are

legal obligations, whereas implicit terms are communal expectations based on the interaction that exists between the organisation and society as a whole.

An institution or government action that is perceived to have acted in a manner inconsistent with the explicit and implicit values defined in the social contract faces a legitimacy question. Accepted as legitimate, government institutions, actions and policies (like PPPs) are perceived as being responsible and useful and are allowed by the public to operate considerably without coercion. Yet, the question of what is legitimacy is not clear, not even in organisational management science and political science field, where it has been the subject of extensive study (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012). In the context of infrastructure project management, Witz et al. (2021, p. 377) observed that prevailing research tends to treat impacted stakeholders 'as a passive and monolithic audience', ignoring their 'subjective interpretation of the relationship between the PPP project and the societal context'. This 'subjective interpretation', according the authors, is built by heterogeneous individuals and groups with diverse and at times conflicting interest, objectives and expectations.

Therefore, to gain conceptual clarity, we turn to Schoon's (2022) operationalisation of legitimacy. The author identified the presence of three empirical elements in legitimacy: an audience (a community stakeholder group), an object of legitimacy (the PPP project) and a relationship between the audience and the object of legitimacy. Accordingly, the object of legitimacy is the subject of audience evaluation, and audience evaluations are based on the object's conformity to expectations that define the relationship and are rooted in shared beliefs and. 'Legitimacy thus implies that the audience are positively oriented towards an object of legitimacy based on mutual expectations to which the object conforms' (Schoon 2022, p. 13).

Following Schoon's (2022) operationalisation, we argued that legitimacy is a matter of perception, typically construed as a process, founded on interactions between the PPP project and the community group members' acceptance (or rejection) of the implicit and explicit claims of the former to be an appropriate, responsible and useful action or policy that has the right to expect support (Derakhshan et al. 2019; Witz et al. 2021). In other words, 'legitimacy is not just about process or performance but is heavily rooted in various aspects of 'collective identity', such as beliefs, religion and tradition' (Nixon et al. 2017, p. 11). For example, Beetham (2013) proposed a conceptualisation of legitimacy that takes account of how beliefs, expectations and actions contribute to legitimacy building. From this perspective, legitimacy comes from whether or not certain people or groups correspond to the

normative content of the formal and informal rules that govern the power relationship in question.

The emphasis on beliefs aligns with Suchman's (1995, p. 574) widely accepted definition of legitimacy as a 'generalised perception/assumption of the desirability or appropriateness of an entity's actions within some socially constructed system of beliefs, values and definitions'. Suchman's (1995) definition views legitimacy as a stakeholder perception that dynamically interacts with the social context. This perspective we believed is essential for understanding social legitimacy (Witz et al. 2021), particularly in infrastructure PPP, where legitimacy is not gained because the government implemented a PPP policy or because some PPP projects have proven to be successful (Derakhshan et al. 2019; Witz et al. 2021). Approached from this perspective, we can sufficiently analyse the nuance of social legitimacy in the context of urban infrastructure PPPs and how urban actors can design effective community engagement strategies that could lead to legitimacy building.

## 2.2 Characteristics and dimensions of shared beliefs

The concept of legitimacy, as outlined in section 2.1, suggests a key role of shared beliefs in determining ultimately how people perceive, judge and respond to government institutions or policies such as PPPs based on shared beliefs and about the state's performance in the public (Beetham 2013). Therefore, their characteristics and dimensions as they relate to our study require some further attention. This section not to provides an exhaustive review of what shared beliefs are and are not, but also provides an overview to guide our research and for PPP professionals to understand the salience of shared beliefs in the relationship between community engagement and legitimacy building. Examining people's attitudes towards an issue or a subject can help us understand and predict behaviours.

Research has confirmed the pervasiveness of shared norms or beliefs as a determinant of group members' attitudes, perceptions and actions towards others, institutions and organisations (Suddaby et al. 2017; Olateju et al. 2021; Witz et al. 2021). Within the various classifications, descriptions and definitions of social norms or beliefs, our point of interest is the recognition that there are shared beliefs that shape expectations (Beetham 2013), which, in turn, serve as a reference system for community members to judge the expected action or performance of other people or groups within a specific social context or socio-economic issue like the provision of infrastructure

services through PPPs. Accordingly, legitimacy is ‘generated by the alignment – or lack thereof – between the beliefs widely held by specific individuals or groups and the normative content of the rules, both formal and informal, governing the power relationship in question’ (Nixon et al. 2017, p. 14). On that note, a community’s characteristic patterns of thought, perception and behaviour towards a socio-economic issue like PPP emanate from the predominant shared beliefs within a society (Khan et al. 2021) about the appropriateness of a PPP as a government institution or action for providing public infrastructure services and not from individuals’ personal beliefs.

Nevertheless, many dimensions of social beliefs are important for collective action and the relationship between the state and citizens or communities. In the context of the provision of infrastructure services, government institutions’ actions and policies are expected to be provided competently (effectively and efficiently), ethically (procedural justice) and fairly for the economy and society as a whole (McLoughlin 2015; OECD 2017). These interpretations usually involve the type of situation, the type of interactions that take place in it and the structural power – the contextual conditions for negotiations between some pairs of actors in a network (Bell 2012). In this sense, beliefs are not the sole determinant of how a person chooses to behave or express opinions; situational and contextual factors can mediate the influence of beliefs on people’s expectations and behaviours (Beetham 2013; Khan et al. 2021). If shared beliefs influence individual attitudes and behaviours, how does an individual choose which shared beliefs to believe? In the next section, we focus on the social identity approach to stakeholders (community engagement) to analyse this.

### 3 Social identity approach to community engagement in infrastructure PPP

The stakeholder engagement literature has proposed community engagement as a suitable strategy for addressing the social legitimacy challenges in PPPs (Alfred and Yates 2016; Castelblanco et al. 2022). Yet, the ‘lack of specificity around stakeholder identity’ remains a serious obstacle to further develop the actual practice of stakeholder engagement (Aaltonen et al. 2021). Nonetheless, advancements in stakeholder engagement have stipulated the use of other interpretive tools, for example, social identity theory, which can explain complexities in human perception and attitude to support the abstraction of the stakeholder

theory (Aaltonen et al. 2021). For instance, stakeholders ‘are no longer conceptualised by their relationships with a focal organisation but as actors who can affect – or are affected by – a shared socio-economic issue’ (Schneider and Sachs 2017, p. 3).

From this perspective, ‘a group of people, organisations or businesses whose relationships are tied to a common geographical location, have a common interest, and share values’ (Bhaskara 2015, p. 43) can form stakeholder groups in the context of a socio-economic issue (Witz et al. 2021), like an infrastructure PPP. These community groups may perceive the infrastructure PPP as illegitimate and, as a consequence, take collective action to oppose it. This is how the social legitimacy challenge faced by PPPs is created. Accordingly, community engagement strategies need to be based on appeals of relevance, context, emotion and problem recognition through dialogic frames that recognise that legitimacy is a ‘relational property, determined by the beliefs and perceptions of audience’ (Tallberg and Zürn 2019, p. 586) about the appropriateness of an institution or its actions within the context of a social-economic issue. Yet, infrastructure PPPs and project stakeholder research and practice have rarely used the social identity theory to understand social legitimacy and support the advancement of stakeholder (community) engagement (Witz et al. 2021).

According to the social identity perspective, humans naturally categorise themselves and others as a hodgepodge of identities to make sense of a complicated world (Verkuyten 2021). Such social categorisation of oneself and others into ingroups and outgroups results in a ‘we’ versus ‘they’ polarisation and shapes intergroup relationships (Witz et al. 2021). It also provides the group with a meaningful identity, which, in turn, provides the group with the psychological and tangible resources they need for taking collective actions (Verkuyten 2021). The social identity perspective or theory, therefore, recognised the ‘associated cognitive processes and social beliefs in group processes and intergroup relation’ (Hogg 2016, p. 3).

It is unlikely that the community–PPP relationship will escape this psychological process. For instance, the legitimacy of an infrastructure PPP is a direct appeal to being categorised as an appropriate government action worthy of support (Bottoms and Tankebe 2012). Related to this, Witz et al. (2021) argued that individuals impacted by a project can form a stakeholder group based on ‘shared beliefs, values and goals in the context of a socio-economic issue’ (Schneider and Sachs 2017, p. 42). In this sense, they see the state and its institutions (a PPP) as an outgroup and are able to take collective action in the form

of social movements. Thus, we argued that using the social identity approach as a theoretical lens is relevant for two reasons: Firstly, if community engagement is viewed as a socio-economic interaction between groups, community group members and public officials and individuals who are participating would likely classify themselves in relation to their subjective identification with a social group (i.e., create or reinforce a social identity) based on some sets of shared beliefs, rather than in relation to their unique individual characteristics (i.e., personal identity) (Witz et al. 2021). Secondly, the public official(s) who designed and initiated the engagement may constitute a potential salient outgroup (Hogg 2016; Verkuyten 2021). This affords individuals the opportunity to differentiate their salient ingroup from this outgroup.

## 4 Research methodology

The starting point for our research is the focus on understanding what motivates ‘local communities’ to oppose (support) an infrastructure PPP in their proximity. Thus, we followed the recent suggestion by Song et al. (2022, p. 338) for the combination of structure and contextual interaction, especially ‘in the stream of PPP research, to connect shared beliefs, community engagement and legitimacy building. We adopted a multiple-case study not necessarily to compare (Yin 2014) but to avoid the misjudgement of events’ representativeness that does occur within a single case and to study the research question in-depth within a context (Yin 2014). Figure 1 summarises the research process that is explained in subsequent sections.

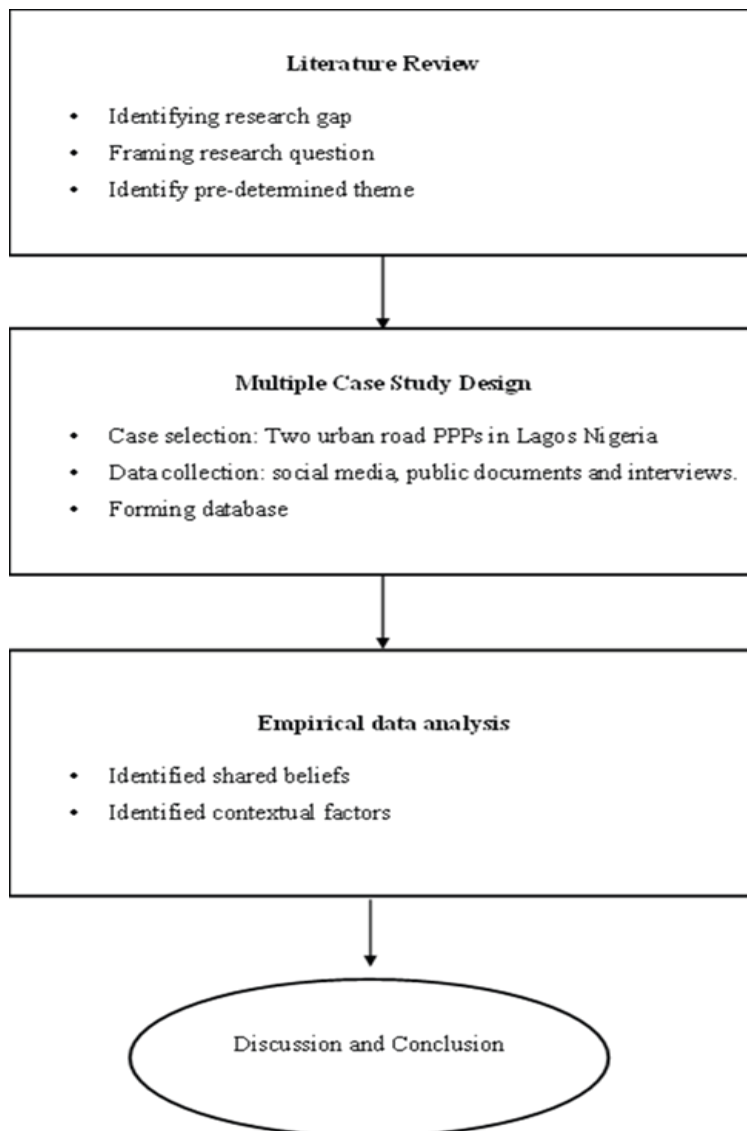


Fig. 1: Research process. PPPs, public–private partnerships.



## 4.1 Case context

### 4.1.1 Lekki–Epe Expressway, Lagos, Nigeria

The Lagos state government signed a 30-year concession agreement with the Lekki Concession Company (LCC) in 2006 to upgrade and operate the 49.3-km Lekki–Epe road into a six-lane inter-state road with three toll gates. The project struggled from the beginning. It took >2 years to secure a sovereign guarantee from the federal government because different political parties controlled the federal and state governments. Construction work was also delayed, and when tolling began in October 2011, residents affected by the project were dissatisfied. Some argued that tolling should not begin until the entire 49.3-km road was complete, leading to protests. To defuse the situation, the state government delayed tolling until December 2011, promising to cover investors' lost income. When the concessionaire introduced a second toll gate in 2012, protests turned violent. The following year, the state government exercised the contract's buy-back option.

### 4.1.2 Lekki–Ikoyi Bridge

The Lekki–Ikoyi Link Bridge is a 1.36-km (0.84 miles) cable-stayed bridge located near the Lekki–Epe Expressway in Lagos. Inaugurated on 29 May 2013, the bridge attracts tourists and fitness-minded residents who use the wide curbs for jogging and running. Lekki and Ikoyi commuters are relieved to avoid Lekki and Ozumba Mbadiwe traffic via the new bridge. The bridge is the most convenient alternative route to Ikoyi, Lekki and surrounding areas for rush-hour commuters. Despite being more expensive than the Lekki–Epe Expressway, tolling has met less resistance.

## 4.2 Data collection

Our data collection followed two stages: Firstly, following emerging research using social media in project management (Lobo and Abid 2020; Mathur et al. 2021), we

collected data from Nairaland (the most popular social media platform in Nigeria) and online newspaper platforms such as the Vanguard online and Punch online, to construct meanings mainly from the perception of social reality expressed by citizens (human actors) across the two cases online. Our data collection at this stage was carried out through a third party (a research organisation). Although there are many social media platforms, such as Nairaland Forum, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, and online newspapers in Nigeria, the media platforms in this study were purposefully chosen based on their high interactivity and real-time information delivery potential, large audience, and wider coverage. For instance, Nairaland is the most popular local microblogging platform for discussing issues in Nigeria (Taiwo et al. 2021). It is also known for its re-posting and analysis of comments from other social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. Similarly, the Vanguard and Punch newspapers are based in Lagos.

The second stage of our data collection starts entails the analysis of the data from the first stage. Using an open-ended interview protocol, we elicit data (insights) from government officials involved with the two projects and PPP professionals (Table 1). We leverage our professional network to carefully and purposefully select the interviewees. For instance, the four public servants interviewed were involved with the two projects. The primary objective of the data collection at this stage was to understand the difference in the level of community opposition and validate the contextual factors identified in the review of the literature. In addition to broadening the scope of our research's engaged scholarship.

## 4.3 Data analysis

Our data analysis consists of three steps: Firstly, we selected, focused, simplified, summarised and categorised the data sets (from both online and interviews separately) using the pre-determined themes from our review of the literature (Bingham and Witkowsky 2022). For example, we categorised the online naturalistic datasets

**Tab 1:** List of professionals interviewed.

S/N	Description	Code	Interview mode
1	An executive with the state ministry of infrastructure	Executive -1	Face-to-face via note-taking
2	An executive with the state ministry of infrastructure	Executive -2	Face-to-face via note-taking
7	PPP consultant with the federal ministry of finance	Consultant	Zoom (recording not allowed)
8	Director at PPP agency	Director	Zoom (recording not allowed)

PPP, public–private partnership.

based on the three pre-defined socio-beliefs (value, competence/effectiveness and procedural justice). During the stage, we focused on the contextual meaning of the text.

Secondly, we took multiple manual readings (Mathur et al. 2021) of the datasets in each category independently, moving back and forth between what the data show, the research questions and theoretical points of interest, and establishing and refining the dialectical relationship between what the data show and the research question and theoretical point of interest. From each author's review and findings based on the pre-determined themes, we discussed and harmonised our findings. This evolving and iterative process helped us refine our themes. Thereafter, we present our findings using a narrative strategy.

## 5 Results

The Results section is organised into three subsections: In the first section, we present the descriptions of the two cases, followed by the shared beliefs and systems based on the analysis of our online data and, finally, the contextual factors based on our analysis of the interviews. We have not mentioned any names or reveal any information about our interviewees that can be directly traced back to them for ethical reasons. Also, when making references to quotations from online data, we removed the names of people from such quotations; instead, we used codes.

### 5.1 Identified shared beliefs about PPPs in communities

Across the two cases, we identified three interrelated shared beliefs about the state and public institutions' performance that have been extended to judge the legitimacy of PPP in Nigeria.

#### 5.1.1 Shared beliefs 1: Infrastructures are public service and should be free

There is a general belief that the provision of public services like urban infrastructure is the responsibility of the government and should be free since citizens are already paying taxes. This expectation was expressed in several social media posts and online news articles by community members across the two cases as highlighted here:

*'No doubt, we want the road, but to ask us to pay toll is impossible. Moreover, the government is supposed to provide roads since we are taxpayers, but we cannot afford to bear the cost of the tolls'*  
*'We are opposed to tolls. There is no doubt that the community needs good roads, but we should not be allowed to pay through our nose since our tax will speak for us'*

These perceptions are consistent with the literature indicating that the main barriers to user-based PPP are rarely economic or technical, but rather political (Cui et al. 2018). Generally, urban roads (except roads linking airports) are toll-free in Nigeria. As a result, citizens believe that infrastructure is a public service and should be provided for free to all. Therefore, it was difficult for the users of both roads to transition to paying tolls. Most of them feel they have paid too much to the government.

#### 5.1.2 Shared beliefs 2: Public institutions are not effective and efficient in-service delivery

Citizens expect institutions to perform efficiently and effectively in accordance with the roles assigned to them by law or with social beliefs in the eyes of citizens (McCloughlin 2015). Any disappointment around these expectations will end in a legitimacy challenge. Clearly, from the two cases, citizens do not believe that the government can deliver on the promised benefit for which they are being asked to pay as expressed in the following statements:

*'A country like ours where the government have done absolutely nothing, not even the basics (light, water, roads) have been provided and how do you expect the masses who live on less than a dollar a day to willingly pay their taxes when all you read and see on the papers and news is mismanagement of funds'*  
*'Let them show us what they have done with the money they have made so far in all levels of government, then, they can believe them'*  
*The other nations that they are talking about collects money and people see what they have done with the money, unlike Nigeria's govt that lace their wallet with the money'*

#### 5.1.3 Shared belief 3: PPP is a form of clientelism

A very strong clientelism bias was evident in the expectations and judgements surrounding the two projects. Clientelism refers to the allocation of private goods, such as jobs or grants, by a patron to his clients. Politicians, people holding responsible government positions, political authorities, public enterprises and bureaucrats are perceived to be corrupt, creating policies and giving out public assets to friends and cronies all in the name of attracting private sector participation:

*'What gives them the right to do that? Come and collect the toll, make we see. Armed robbers. Thunder strikes all the political thieves in Nigeria!!!'*

*'It is a very callous idea that someone will pick up a fully functional 4-lane road, add one lane on both sides making it six lanes and then erect 3 toll gates within 30 kilometres and collect toll for 30 years!! Please let fear God'*

These findings are further supported by people's responses after the government cancelled the Lekki–Epe Expressway contract and implemented the buy-back option. Citizens still believe that there is more to the PPP transaction that has not been revealed:

*'I do not know what to say about this because I don't want to insinuate. I just feel that this deal was bound to happen right from inception. When you pay someone money, he ought to earn for 30 years today, it means the inflation that is expected to eat into that future income would have been eroded and he is better off with the money today than earning it in 30 years'.*

*'Honestly, the deal isn't looking good. The winners are the owners of LCC. I do not want to analyse this because it will be deficient. After all, adequate financial information was not made available but from the little here, I can confidently say that LCC investors are smiling at the bank in a joyous mood. While Lagos state will have to raise extra funds to finish the road. Another wasted project again'.*

## 5.2 Community structural power as a contextual factor

In addition to the three identified shared beliefs about PPPs that are widely held in Nigeria, our cross-case study analysis, which was based on data from interviews with senior state executives and senior PPP professionals that were involved in the two projects, reveals 'community structural power' as a contextual or situational factor. This explains why the two toll roads faced different levels of community opposition. Structural power is the contextual condition for negotiations between a community group and the state (Bell 2012). For instance, the Lekki–Ikoyi Bridge connects two relatively affluent areas (community groups) in Lagos. Each of these communities has a neighbourhood association, which makes it easier for the state to identify representatives and engage with the communities. On the other hand, community groups have the structural power to explore possibilities before making commitments and believe they can influence outgroups:

*'Unlike Lekki -Epe expressway, it was easier for us to engage with the Lekki Resident and Ikoyi Resident association because they have legitimate direct representation. (Executive -1)*

*'Don't forget they (the Lekki phase 1 and Ikoyi resident association) have an association that meets regularly, engagement was not complex, we know whom to talk to and it was easy to obtain negotiate options.' (Executive -2)*

Accordingly, there were quite a lot of behind-the-scenes community engagement throughout the Lekki–Ikoyi Bridge project development. In contrast, the diverse nature of the communities' groups surrounding the Lekki -Epe expressway, means government was unable to identify communities' representation to engage. The question of who to talk to was complex; as a result, the state devotes less attention to the communities until the introduction of tolling and the resistance thereof:

*We did but it was more of talking to the traditional leaders when tolling was to be introduced. We have too many communities and interest groups on that corridor, who do you talk to and who is representing who. (Executive -2)*

Findings from newspaper extracts and social media posts also agreed with the interview results: the high level of community resistance towards tolling of the Lekki–Epe Expressway was due to the lack of a robust community engagement at the initial stage of the project. For instance, while the advantages and benefits of the project were acknowledged, communities felt ignored:

*'The project will help the community in its own little way but only a section of the community was carried along while the rest were ignored by the stakeholders'.*

*'If people had been carried along, solutions would have been found and all the issues sorted but you don't just think you can bulldoze people with the instrument of government'.*

The lack of structural power was also attributed to the weak local government system in Nigeria, which constrains bottom-up decision-making that lead to meaningful community engagement. In Nigeria (as evidenced by our research), the capacity of the local level of government, where all urban actors can be enabled to engage with communities, is curtailed by resource, constitutional and institutional factors connected to their position in the national political system's hierarchy.

*'Community engagement is only effective when all levels of government are involved, unfortunately, we don't have a functional local government in our (Nigeria's) current governance structure. (Consultant)*

## 6 Discussion

This research revealed the dialectic relationship between a community group's motivation to oppose an infrastructure PPP within their proximity and the shared beliefs widely held in society. The shared beliefs about PPPs we observed create a sense of 'we' versus 'they'. This



polarisation motivates members of a community group to act together in the name of, or for the sake of, the interests of collectivism. Consequently, in a tit-for-tat manner, community groups take collective actions to oppose the project (Witz et al. 2021), especially when they lack structural power (Bell 2012; Schneider and Sachs 2017). The research contributions to policy and practice and research are succinctly captured in Sections 6.1 and 6.2.

## 6.1 Policy and practice implications

Our research has implications for nation- or sector-wide policies and practices in infrastructure delivery. Firstly, as a starting point, policymakers must understand the underlying narratives about the state and its institutions' performance in the public arena to understand how community stakeholder groups evolve and take collective actions to address issues affecting their well-being. The shared beliefs in the public arena vary by community stakeholder group and even by sub-national region (Nixon et al. 2017). Therefore, it is critical to identify and segment impacted stakeholders based on their attitudes and levels of perception about the state before designing appropriate engagement strategies, targeting each group's peculiarities (contextual or situational factors). Such an approach could help policymakers easily communicate the rationale behind PPP, build legitimacy and create social value. In addition, it will make it easy for authorities to identify, prioritise, and integrate impacted communities' needs and concerns into planning, design, financing and the PPP contract or arrangement (Othman and AlNassar 2021).

Secondly, it should be noted that it is not the shared beliefs per se that matter, rather what they mean functionally in terms of the situation at hand and the group's structural power. Thus, how people view changes depends not simply on the nature and size of the change but also on who made it and how. Were they consulted? Were their views visibly considered? Is the proposal consistent with their view? In this sense, creative actions that are sensitive to the social context and a careful understanding of the factors that drive these shared beliefs should be a critical component of a government's community engagement strategy to build legitimacy and avert legitimacy crises. For instance, the state can identify and partner with private and non-profit institutions that already possess strong social legitimacy to build legitimacy.

Finally, for community engagement to be effective, they need to be deliberately premised on influencing collective behaviour in the desired direction. The acceptance

of a PPP project depends on the extent to which the PPP's meaningful rationale is communicated as either inclusive and supportive of their socio-economic needs or suppressive. The former facilitates the community's engagement, while the latter engenders distrust and suspicion. For example, an educational campaign that communicates a meaningful rationale for PPP by showcasing 'quick win PPP projects' in the urban space will allow and encourage citizens to be guided by their interests and values. This, subsequently, prompts the change in the shared beliefs and the adoption and acceptance of PPP over time.

## 6.2 Contributions to PPP stakeholder management research

The present findings contribute to infrastructure PPP stakeholder management research in two ways. Firstly, the identified shared beliefs enhance our understanding of the salience of shared beliefs in community-PPP relationship and legitimacy building. This issue has not been adequately addressed in prior research. From a social identity perspective, we clarify how these shared beliefs form the mental mode that community groups use to judge or evaluate the appropriateness of an infrastructure PPP within their proximity and, as a consequence, can form a meaningful social group that can take collective actions. Secondly, and much more broadly, our article reinforces the growing attention for an approach to infrastructure project management (including PPP) research that is framed in the broadest institutional terms (Soderlund and Sydow 2019). By advancing and bringing the social identity perspective on stakeholder engagement into the research spotlight, we ignite a focus on the pervasiveness of shared beliefs in the recursive relationship between community engagement and legitimacy building.

## 7 Conclusion

Although the generalisations derived from this research could provide a useful insight for researchers and policymakers designing and implementing community engagement strategies, particularly in Nigeria and sub-Saharan African countries in general, a few limitations that offer directions for future research should also be noted. Firstly, our generalisations were based on a specific country (Nigeria) and a single type of infrastructure (urban roads). A second limitation is that we mostly relied on social media data for constructing our case study. However, to triangulate and broaden the scope of our research's

engaged scholarship, we also collected data via interviews and from public documentation such as news articles. In this regard, further research might be carried out to test the findings of this study in different contexts, outside the realm of urban road infrastructure and other countries. As our research was based in a developing country, further research should be conducted in the context of a developed country where formal institutions that enable socio-economic transactions are strong. In addition, the root cause of these shared beliefs can be investigated to gain a richer and more profound insight into differing perceptions, behaviours, needs and expectations of the local community.

Nonetheless, the primary goal of our research was to identify the shared beliefs that shaped a community group's perceptions and attitudes towards an infrastructure PPP built in their neighbourhood. We found that the misalignment of an infrastructure PPP policy's economic values and objectives with the shared beliefs in society can result in community backlash, which could potentially jeopardise the success of an otherwise good urban infrastructure PPP project in the social context. Therefore, community engagement should be based on appeals of relevance, context, emotion and problem recognition. None of this is easy. But the effort may be worthwhile when the stakes are as high as they are now when it comes to how best to crowd in private capital to bridge the current infrastructure gap in Nigeria.

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