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Application of Soft Project Management Practices in African Infrastructure Projects: A Systematic Review

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ABSTRACT

Africa's infrastructure projects are often delayed, cost more, and yield unsound outcomes, even with improvements in technical project management. Though soft project management practices are known to enhance project performance worldwide, stakeholder engagement, leadership, communication, and conflict management are not well investigated in the African context. This review aimed to systematise the findings on the applications, mechanisms of implementation, and effects of soft project management practices in African infrastructure projects. The search was made in Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, Google Scholar, AJOL and institutional repositories and enhanced with grey literature and citation chasing. The paper included 16 peerreviewed studies according to PRISMA 2020, published between 2015 and 2025. A piloted PICOS-based form was used to extract data and descriptive mapping, thematic analysis and configurational logic to synthesise data to determine patterns of practise and context-specific outcomes. The results show that good soft PM practises, such as participatory planning, formal stakeholder interactions, culturally responsive communication, and leadership, have a positive impact on the project performance in terms of cost, schedule, quality, stakeholder satisfaction, and sustainability. Contextual enablers and barriers, including the quality of governance, political interference, the availability of resources, and cultural norms, are also evident in the context, and they mediate the effectiveness of soft practises. Notably, effective projects tend to use both formal and informal networks and community involvement to maximise the levels of acceptance and delivery of results. This review builds upon the stakeholder theory and views of relational governance by demonstrating how African socio-cultural and institutional contexts inform the adoption and effects of soft PM practise. The paper suggests the institutionalisation of soft practises, managerial capacity development, utilising local networks, and policy alignment to enhance infrastructure project delivery on the continent.

Keywords: African infrastructure projects; project performance; soft project management; stakeholder engagement; sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Infrastructure development in Africa has a significant impact on its socio-economic change. The history of infrastructure investments in areas like transportation, energy, water, housing, and telecommunications has always been clear in the connection to the economic growth, regional integration, poverty alleviation, and even the fruition of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Calderón & Servén, 2014; African Development Bank, 2020). Accessibility has been increased, costs have been reduced, more and better services have been provided, and the establishment of industries has been facilitated, among the benefits that infrastructure brings about in terms of socio-economic change priorities for African governments and development partners as well (World Bank, 2019). The need for infrastructure that is not only resilient but also accommodating to the poor has become even more pressing in the light of rapid urban migration, population increase, and climate change.

However, it has to be acknowledged that these challenges are still a reality in the African continent as far as infrastructure development projects are concerned. Most of the time, when empirical research is carried out, the industries involved are reported to face the following: cost overruns, delays, inferior quality, changes in the project scope, and, in some instances, even total abandonment of the projects (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017; Söderlund et al., 2017). Additionally, these issues are often made worse by factors like political meddling, weak

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institutions, lack of skilled workers, complicated stakeholder situations, and socio-cultural dynamics that influence both project decision-making and implementation (Statsenko et al., 2023; Amoatey & Ankrah, 2017).

Thus, the infrastructure investments have failed to produce the benefits they were meant to bring, forcing us to think more about the matters of efficiency, accountability, and sustainability.

The traditional project management techniques have primarily relied on "hard" or technical so-called controls and management strategies like risk registers, performance metrics, scheduling techniques, cost management systems, etc. Though these tools are still necessary, an increase in the evidence pointing to their inadequacy as the sole means of managing the complexity and uncertainty that is typical of infrastructure projects, especially in developing and transitional areas, is evident (Turner, 2014; Pollack et al., 2018).

In turn, the issue of project management has been gradually focusing on “soft” project management practices, which include stakeholder engagement, leadership, communication, and conflict management. This is because these practices consider human behaviour, relationships, power dynamics, and contextual sensitivity and thus are regarded as essential in the project areas with great difficulties and in the process of getting good results (Müller & Lecoeuvre, 2014; Clarke, 2010).

Soft project management practices, although now recognised as indispensable, remain underresearched and poorly assimilated in the context of African infrastructure projects. Stakeholder engagement, adaptive leadership, open communication, and proactive conflict management are the so-called soft practices which existing studies show are decisive in determining project performance in complex socio-political settings (Aaltonen & Kujala, 2016; Ofori, 2008). However, a lot of this evidence is disjointed across case studies, sectorspecific analyses, and broader project management discussions, with little attention paid to Africa as a unique contextual framework.

One of the main issues is that soft practices are presented very differently across the literature. They are not clearly defined and are instead treated as part of a larger governance or management issue, or analysed separately without categorisation or linkage to measurable project outcomes (Khalifeh et al., 2020; Pollack et al., 2018). As a result, practitioners and policymakers lack a profound, unified, and scientifically supported understanding of how these practices are perceived, applied, and linked to project success or failure in African infrastructure

projects. The present systematic review results in the dilution of this ambiguity by merging empirical studies with the provision of a clearer and more consistent image of soft project management practices in the context of African infrastructure. The primary goal of this systematic review is to synthesise and critically evaluate existing empirical evidence regarding the definition, implementation, and connection to project outcomes of soft project management practices within African infrastructure projects. To achieve this goal, the review is directed by the following research question: In what way have soft project management practices been defined, implemented, and connected to project outcomes in African infrastructure projects?

Unquestionably, this review provides a structured synthesis of a disjointed body of knowledge for researchers. Systematic reviews have been increasingly acknowledged as the most credible method to amalgamate empirical evidence, iron out conceptual doubts, and pinpoint the areas where the existing research lacks in theoretical and methodological aspects (Clark et al., 2024; Chapman, 2021). This paper not only opens up the discussion of the African infrastructure projects aspect but also helps to build the theory that is sensitive to the context, and to set the stage for subsequent empirical and comparative studies on the soft project management practices.

Notably, the review, besides providing hard evidence, gives soft practices like stakeholder engagement, leadership, communication, and conflict management in terms of their impact on project outcomes to the practitioners, including project managers, contractors, development organisations, and policymakers, as well as the latter. The materials of the past studies have demonstrated that through these practices, the collaboration has been improved, the disputes have been reduced, the risks have been mitigated effectively, and the stakeholders have been satisfied with the process, all of which are milestones towards project delivery in difficult terrains (Amoatey & Hayibor, 2017; Müller & Turner, 2010). The review, by extracting the lessons from the empirical articles, is thus assisting in the process of infrastructure project management in terms of informed decisionmaking and capacity building.

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At the broader policy and development level, the enhanced application of successful soft project management practices is going to affect the efficient usage of the scarce development resources and the sustainability of infrastructure assets, which together will yield socio-economic benefits for the African communities. Better project results will then be directly contributing to the national development agendas and the SDGs, and so the role of infrastructure as a catalyst for inclusive and sustainable development in Africa will be even more emphasised.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

The review employed a systematic review to gather and analyse the data through the use of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework rules and systematic review protocols in management and engineering research.

The selected plan aimed at being transparent, reproducible, and rigorous, at the same time reducing biases and subjectivity in the identification of studies, their evaluation and synthesis (Liberati et al., 2009; Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

At the same time, a structured and sequential review process was used to allow a comprehensive and trustworthy synthesis of the empirical evidence regarding soft project management practices in African infrastructure projects. The detailed information given herein is organised into several sections, namely: 2.1 Systematic Review Design, 2.2 Eligibility Criteria, 2.3 Information Sources and Search Strategy, 2.4 Study Selection Process, 2.5 Quality Appraisal and Risk of Bias Assessment, 2.6 Data Extraction, 2.7 Data Synthesis Approach, and lastly 2.8 Reporting.

Systematic review design

Systematic review design was selected because it is the only method that fairly and clearly combines scattered empirical evidence, reduces bias from reviewers, and produces a reproducible synthesis of existing knowledge.

In view of the scattered and poorly reported nature of research on soft project management practices in African infrastructure projects, a systematic review is especially effective for discovering trends, delineating theoretical limits, and re-evaluating the empirical results from a critical perspective across different contexts. This method has been recognised as the most powerful one in the progression of evidence-informed knowledge in the fields of management and construction research (Tranfield et al., 2003).

The analysis was executed according to the PRISMA 2020 framework, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) reframing the usual report making into a structured one (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA method was chosen to make the review more transparent in terms of the used methods, to ensure that all relevant information was included in the reporting, and to make it more comparable with other related studies.

A detailed review protocol was prepared for the study before its start, which gave the review objectives, eligibility criteria, and analytical procedures; the risk of selective reporting and analytical bias was lessened. The use of this protocol, though not being registered in an external database, guaranteed consistency and methodological discipline throughout the review process.

The review process passed through the steps of study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, final inclusion, and qualitative synthesis. Digital screening methods such as Rayyan were used for reference management and to help make independent screening decisions. These systematic approaches made it easy and clear to identify and classify the soft project management practices, especially stakeholder engagement, leadership, communication, and conflict management, thus allowing a clear merging of how these practices are understood and applied in the context of African infrastructure projects.

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Eligibility criteria

The researcher adopted the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, and Study Design (PICOS) framework for setting up inclusion and exclusion criteria. By this method, they guaranteed the whole process of study selection to be consistent and transparent.

Table 1: Eligibility Criteria Table using PICOS

PICOS Element	Eligibility Criteria
Population (P)	Projects concerning infrastructure like roads, energy, water and sanitation, housing, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) were all considered in the context of the different African nations.
Intervention (I)	The usage of soft project management practices, notably stakeholder engagement, leadership, communication, conflict management, or other people- and context-related practices that are very close to the mentioned ones, was implied or discussed very practically.
Comparison (C)	Not mandatory. Availability of studies where soft practices were compared with technical controls or different soft approaches examined was enough for their inclusion.
Outcomes (O)	Outcomes of the project reporting, such as cost, time and quality performance, stakeholder satisfaction and conflict resolution effectiveness, governance and sustainability-related impacts were all among the lists of things to be reported.
Study Design (S)	Different types of studies: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, as well as peerreviewed case studies, systematic or narrative reviews, and English-published conference papers that have been reviewed by peers. Non-peer-reviewed editorials, opinion pieces, and reports were among the exclusions, as well as studies focusing on Africa and project management.

The identification of soft project management practices being unclear from the concept point of view, an allinclusive strategy was taken during the initial selection process. The search terms were so broad that they were related to both behaviour and relationships, along with the terms “project management” and “Africa” or “infrastructure” as synonyms that formed a pair.

The selection of the sources was determined by the differentiation of the context in the project description, even when the terminology was not very specific, and the exclusion of the studies that merely mentioned “soft skills” without any contextual or operational backing. This clearly indicates the existence of challenges that have been associated with the definition and limitation of soft concepts in project management (Bredillet, 2010). Further criteria were applied to make the scope of the review more specific.

The studies that were published only from 2015 to 2025 were included in the review so as to show the then-current thinking in the area of project management. Various types of works were included, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and theses or dissertations, while the grey literature was excluded so that the methodological consistency was ensured. Only English-language publications were checked because of limited resources, and this has been recognised as a possible limitation of the study.

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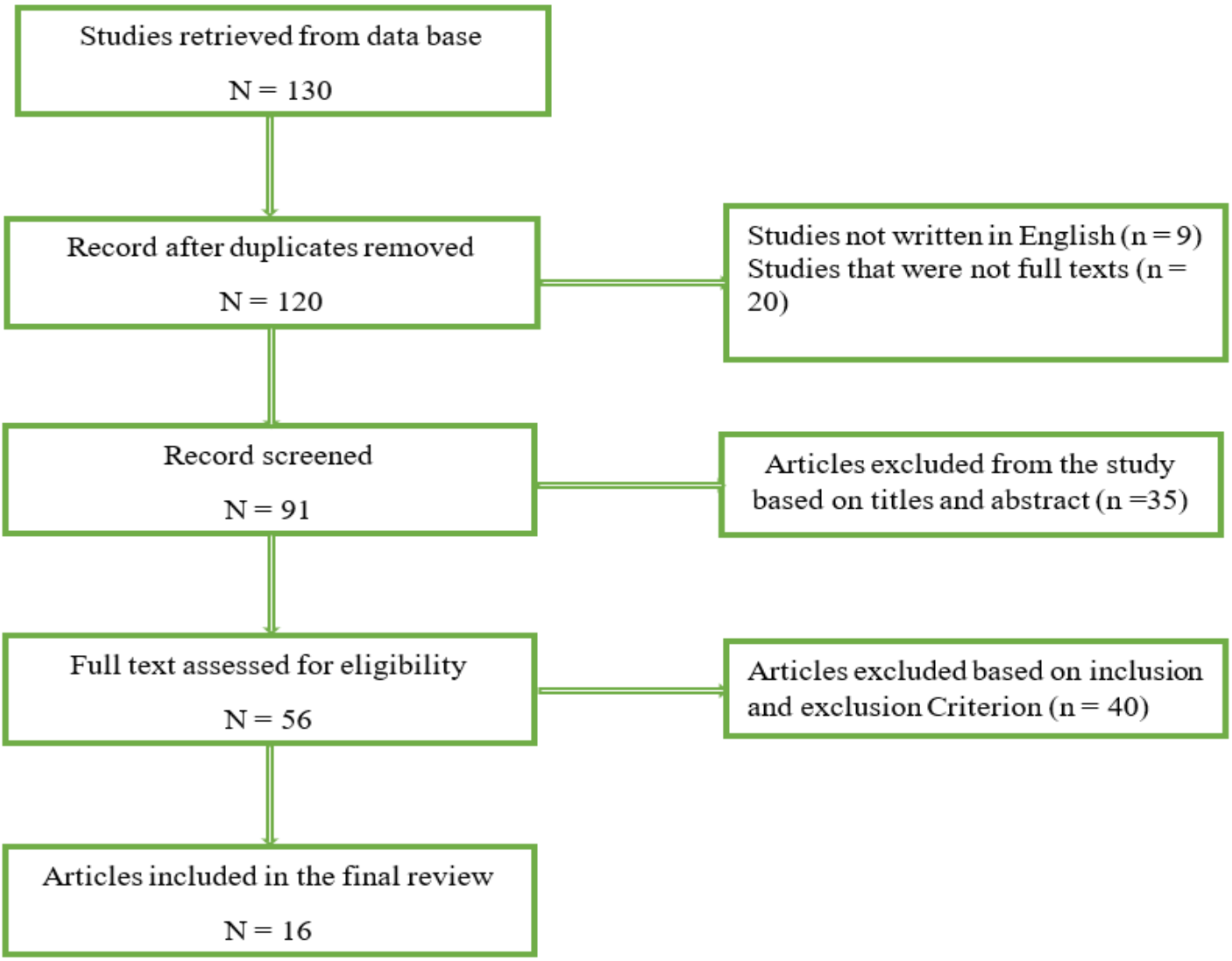

Figure 1: PRISMA reporting framework

Information Sources and Search Strategy

A thorough search was carried out that covered every angle and aspect by looking through multidisciplinary and specific-subject databases. The biggest databases were Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. Moreover, African Journals Online (AJOL) was searched in order to get Africa-centred research that is often not represented enough in the worldwide databases. Besides that, institutional repositories and sources focused on development, such as the World Bank eLibrary and African Development Bank publications, were used as well. The grey literature searches were made through the conference proceedings, government portals, development agencies and non-governmental organisations' reports that were relevant. Backwards and forward citation tracking was performed to discover other similar studies. The decision of these sources was based on the requirements of methodological rigour, disciplinary breadth, and sensitivity to African research contexts, similar to PRISMA-S recommendations (Rethlefsen et al., 2021).

The researcher employed a method of searching that resulted in an output of defined and classified terms, where the search words were logically connected. The selected population included projects that were described as *"infrastructure", "construction", "energy", "transport",* etc. and were located in Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, or had the names of specific countries as a designation. The types of interventions that were considered involved the application of soft practices such as *"stakeholder engagement", "leadership", "communication", "conflict management", "behavioural competence", "people skills"*, and, with respect to methodology, project management (PM). The outcomes that turned up in the search were those that were associated with "*project success", "project failure", "cost overrun", "delay", "stakeholder satisfaction"*, and *"conflict resolution"*. The

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search was also subject to the application of truncation, phrase searching, and filters that were specific to the database for English language and publication dates. The implementation of the combined words in the form of "infrastructure project and Africa" was typical for Scopus search strings. The introduction of search strings was tried out in a small way and adjusted repeatedly to the point of obtaining the perfect balance between sensitivity and specificity, including the gradual introduction of terms such as "development project" in cases where the initial results were not promising.

In order to tackle the implicit aspect of soft project management practices, the search was given synonyms and related concepts, such as "community participation" and "collaborative governance," which are rather broad, in addition to the original terms. Thus, studies were not ruled out for using "soft" terminology at all, as long as the practices were described in substantive terms within the project management context. This method is consistent with the recommendations regarding the search for complex and poorly defined concepts (Booth et al., 2021).

Study selection process

The study selection process was performed following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and represented with a PRISMA flow chart to support the open methodology reporting of the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion phases (Page et al., 2021). The records obtained were uploaded into EndNote for deduplication, and later, Rayyan was applied to facilitate systematic screening and to enable collaboration among the reviewers.

Phase 1: Title and Abstract Screening. Two reviewers screened independent titles and abstracts applying broad inclusion criteria to make the process more sensitive and be able to capture potentially relevant studies. Any differences were communicated and settled by consensus, and a third reviewer was involved if no mutual agreement could be reached.

Phase 2: Full-Text Screening. The full texts of the shortlisted studies were assessed independently against the predefined PICOS criteria. The reasons for exclusion, such as the wrong geographic context, the absence of soft project management practices, and the lack of relevance to infrastructure projects, were systematically recorded. For the texts that were not available, attempts were made to get them through academic library services or by contacting the authors directly.

Phase 3: Final Inclusion. Studies that supported all eligibility criteria were incorporated into the final synthesis and formed the evidence base for analysis.

The decision to include or exclude the studies was made according to the operational descriptions of the practices, such as leadership, communication, or stakeholder engagement, even though some studies did not explicitly use the corresponding terms.

The studies which provided only brief or rhetorical references without any contextual application were left out. A systematic coding spreadsheet was prepared to keep track of how each soft practice was recognised in the selected studies. The inter-rater reliability was calculated using both Cohen’s Kappa and percentage agreement to measure the consistency between the reviewers during the screening. A Kappa value of over 0.60 was aimed at, which denotes substantial concurrence, and the selection process was considered to have good reliability (McHugh, 2012).

Quality appraisal and risk of bias assessment

It is crucial to consider the methodological quality and risk of bias when selecting the evidence for a systematic review, as they are the factors that determine the credibility, robustness, and transferability of the evidence. The quality assessment enables the researcher to get a critical view of the findings by spotting the strengths and weaknesses of the study design, execution, and reporting (Tong et al., 2016).

In this review, the appraisal was used to guide the synthesis and interpretation of results rather than to exclude the studies, as it was acknowledged that contextually rich but methodologically weaker studies might still give important insights into soft project management practices in African infrastructure projects. Due to the varying

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methodologies of the included studies, the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) was chosen as it aids in the consistent evaluation of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs (Hong et al., 2018).

The MMAT makes it possible to compare while at the same time not relying too much on aggregate scoring, thus facilitating nuanced judgment. In qualitative studies, the critique revolved around the transparency of the theoretical framework, the correctness of the data gathering techniques, and the logicality of the analytical steps.

In the case of quantitative studies, the factors considered were the smoothness of the sampling method, the validity of the measures, and the correctness of the statistical analyses applied. The mixed-methods approach involved quality of methodological integration and treatment of differences between qualitative and quantitative results to arrive at a common understanding as the main criterion for evaluation.

Furthermore, contextual sensitivity was singled out as an extra criterion, and this was specifically the degree to which the studies not only recognised but also made allowances for the soft project management practices common to Africa in terms of socio-cultural and institutional settings.

The reviewers who did the quality appraisal were two, and they used the MMAT-based forms to standardise their judgments. The reviewer discussions led to resolving any differences in assessment, and, if necessary, the third reviewer was consulted. The appraisal results were presented in tabular form, with studies classified as high, medium, or low risk of bias in terms of the quality of their findings.

This synthesised quality assessments differently from other strategies, like through the exploration of relationships between methodological rigour and reported findings or through the limitation clarification during interpretation, and so on. This method conforms to the guidelines that suggest the interpretive use of appraisal results in systematic reviews (Lockwood et al., 2015).

Data Extraction

Data extraction was executed using a structured and piloted extraction form that systematically captured and organised key information from all included studies. This process was designed to collect data uniformly, make it possible to compare studies across the board, and, at the same time, not lose the contextual nuances of soft project management practices within African infrastructure projects (Li et al., 2015). This practice guaranteed that all the explicitly and implicitly described practices, implementation mechanisms, and project outcomes were documented in a way that made it easier to combine them later on.

The extraction form went through an iterative development process that was based on the PICOS framework and the research question of the study. Some of the important fields were: study metadata (authors, year, country, study design), *soft practice definitions* (explicit or implicit, dimensions covered), *implementation mechanisms* (tools, actors, timing), *project outcomes* (quantitative metrics, qualitative impacts), and *contextual factors* (governance structures, cultural influences, project type). The form served for uniform capturing of the relevant information with a standardised template, but it was also flexible in that it allowed the emergence of insights.

The form was first tested on about 5-10% of the included studies to check whether it was clear, comprehensive, and consistent in coding. The reviewers discussed and resolved through agreement any discrepancies and ambiguities, thereby refining the form for its final use.

Passages that described leadership, stakeholder engagement, communication, and conflict management were marked for implicit soft practices extraction. The NVivo program had an option to label the new themes that had appeared outside the pre-defined categories, as well as to keep a log of all coding decisions made together with their explanations to ensure transparency and reproducibility.

The data was taken out separately by two reviewers, and then consensus meetings were held to settle any disagreements. An audit trail was kept of all coding decisions and changes made to ensure traceability and inter-rater reliability.

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Table 2: Data Extraction

Authors	Year	Purpose of Study	Location	Study Type	Sector Focus	Soft Practice Definition	Implementation Mechanisms	Project Outcomes	Contextual Factors	Study Limitations
Haar	2024	Assess the impact of stakeholder engagement strategies on project success	Cameroon	Desk-based review	Infrastructure (general)	Implicit stakeholder engagement (trust, collaboration, communication)	Inclusive engagement, tailored communication, and capacity building	Improved collaboration, trust, and project success	Cultural norms, bureaucracy, and resource constraints	Secondary data only; no primary empirical testing
Ssenyange & Chodokufa	2024	Examine the mediation role of stakeholder engagement between leadership and project success.	Uganda	Quantitative (SEM)	Public construction	Explicit stakeholder engagement and leadership	Leadership styles, structured engagement processes	Enhanced project success via the mediation effect	Public sector governance, leadership culture	Cross-sectional design; limited to KCCA
Samwel et al.	2023	Examine the influence of stakeholder management on public project success	Kenya	Quantitative survey	Public works	Explicit stakeholder management	Stakeholder analysis, participation, and expectation management	Improved project success	Government policy, participatory planning	Self-reported data; descriptive analysis
Jaldesa	2025	Examine the effect of stakeholder	Ethiopia (Moyale)	Quantitative (regression)	Construction	Explicit stakeholder engagement	Identification, planning, managing,	Positive effect on project success	Organisational environme	Single organisat

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		management dimensions on project success					monitoring	(except monitoring)	nt, supervision intensity	ion case
Dick-Sagoe et al.	2023	Explore the causes and effects of public project failure	Ghana	Quantitative survey	Public infrastructure	Implicit communication and supervision practices	Communication systems, planning, and monitoring	Project failure, cost escalation, dissatisfaction	Corruption, bureaucracy, political influence	Focus on failure causes, not interventions
Mukakarisa & Njoroge	2024	Assess the effect of stakeholder engagement across project phases	Rwanda	Mixed methods	Construction	Explicit stakeholder engagement	Engagement in planning, implementation, and M&E	Improved project performance	Organisational culture, project phase	Single company focus
Ebekozien et al.	2024	Investigate stakeholder engagement challenges	South Africa	Qualitative (phenomenology)	Construction	Explicit stakeholder engagement	Policy measures, collaborative engagement	Improved collaboration and delivery	Governmental and organisational hindrances	Qualitative perceptions; limited generalisation
Tengan & Aigbavboa	2017	Assess stakeholder participation in M&E	Ghana	Mixed methods	Public construction	Explicit stakeholder participation	Participatory M&E, meetings, CBDP	Poor M&E participation linked to project challenges	Knowledge gaps, time constraints	Descriptive analysis only

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Bondinuba et al.	2025	Examine innovative stakeholder engagement models	Ghana	Quantitative (SEM)	Construction	Explicit innovative engagement	Collaborative tools, participatory planning	Indirect improvement via collaboration	Organisational collaboration culture	Cross-sectional design
Rasebotsa et al.	2024	Develop a CSF framework for social infrastructure delivery	South Africa	Quantitative	Social infrastructure	Implicit collaboration and leadership	Team coordination, decision-making	Improved delivery framework	Provincial socio-economic context	Regional focus limits generalisability
Xegwana et al.	2025	Develop a stakeholder engagement framework for housing delivery	South Africa	Qualitative	Public housing	Explicit stakeholder engagement	Feedback integration, collaboration	Improved housing delivery, satisfaction	Political polarisation, municipal governance	Case-study scope
Debela	2022	Identify CSFs for PPP road projects	Ethiopia	Mixed methods	Road infrastructure (PPP)	Implicit governance and leadership	Policy frameworks, institutional commitment	Improved PPP performance	Legal, political, and social stability	Focus on policy-level factors
Osei-Kyei & Chan	2017	Examine CSFs for PPP construction projects	Ghana	Case study	Construction (PPP)	Implicit communication and community support	Government commitment, community relations	Successful PPP delivery	Institutional and community context	Limited to two projects
Kissi et al.	2019	Examine the impact of	Ghana	Quantitative	Construction	Implicit monitoring and	M&E systems, safety	Improved project	Developing count	Focused on

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		M&E on project success		(PLS-SEM)		evaluation practices	and scope controls	success criteria	ry const raints	M&E only
Kakw'u	2024	Assess PM strategies on the PPP road project performance	Kenya	Mixed methods (PhD thesis)	Road infrastructure (PPP)	Explicit stakeholder engagement	Continuous engagement, planning, M&E	Improved project performance	Urban governance, PPP environment	Doctoral study; context-specific
Richu et al.	2025	Examine stakeholder engagement and road project performance	South Sudan	Quantitative survey	Road infrastructure	Explicit stakeholder engagement	Communication, mapping, feedback, and conflict resolution	Improved cost, time, and quality performance	Conflict-affected, resource-limited context	Small sample size

Source: Authors' compilation (2026)

Data Synthesis Approach

A mixed-methods synthesis that included both narrative and thematic approaches was used to address the differences among the studies that were included and also allowed for the integration of both quantitative and qualitative evidence (Stern et al., 2020). The usage of this method enabled the researcher to discover not only the similarities but also the differences, as well as factors within the context and interrelations between the main outcome and the practice in all the infrastructure projects in Africa that were studied.

Stage 1: Descriptive Mapping. The characteristics of the studies, the definitions of soft practices and the contextual factors were presented in tables, and by using heatmaps, the patterns were visualised in such a way that the frequency and the distribution of the practices according to regions and project types were clearly shown.

Stage 2: Thematic Synthesis. The qualitative data were processed through the coding stage according to the framework suggested by Braun and Clarke (2023), which in turn resulted in the formation of the analytical themes that connected the implementation of soft practices with the project outcomes. The different enablers and barriers that were specific to Africa in terms of informal networks, governance structures, and cultural influences were all compared through the different studies.

Stage 3: Causal Pathway Analysis. Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) was among the methodologies that were applied to create a mapping of the context-mechanism-outcome patterns. This mapping was developed to provide a clearer understanding of how contextual factors play a role in mediating the effectiveness of practices (Oliver et al., 2018).

Triangulation of implicitly described practices among studies was done to increase the validity of the interpretation. Further, sensitivity analyses were performed to examine the influence of studies that had descriptions of low clarity. The software programs NVivo 14 and Microsoft Excel were used to assist in the processes of coding, visualisation, and configurational analysis.

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Reporting

The review was performed in a very strict manner based on the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to make sure that the review process was transparent, reproducible, and verifiable (Page et al., 2021). The final report will give a complete overview of the search strategy, the selection of studies, the extraction of data, the quality assessment, as well as the merging of narrative and thematic synthesis. The open reporting of each methodological step not only contributes to the credibility of the conclusions but also makes independent verification of the evidence possible and ensures that the synthesis of soft project management practices in African infrastructure projects is accessible, auditable, and useful for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Characteristics of Included Studies

This part compiles the evidence from the 16 peer-reviewed studies which were part of the review. Instead of considering the studies as separate contributions, the discussion considers their common features, points of focus, and weaknesses. The discourse then goes on to consider geographical distribution, research design, publication year, and section focus, which altogether set the empirical scope of the review. These results can be seen in a Table form as well in the supplementary file section. (ref Table 3)

Geographic distribution of studies

The location of the studies is such that there is a good representation globally across the West, East, and Southern African regions, although West Africa (N=7) is slightly leading. The countries of Ghana and Kenya are the two focal countries, which is because they are both investing a great deal of money in public infrastructure and at the same time facing challenges related to governance, stakeholder coordination, and accountability (Kissi et al., 2019; Samwel et al., 2023). Research in fragile and evolving contexts like South Sudan and Ethiopia provides a rich understanding by illustrating how soft practices can be employed even in extremely difficult circumstances in the areas of institutions and resources (Debela, 2022; Richu et al., 2025).

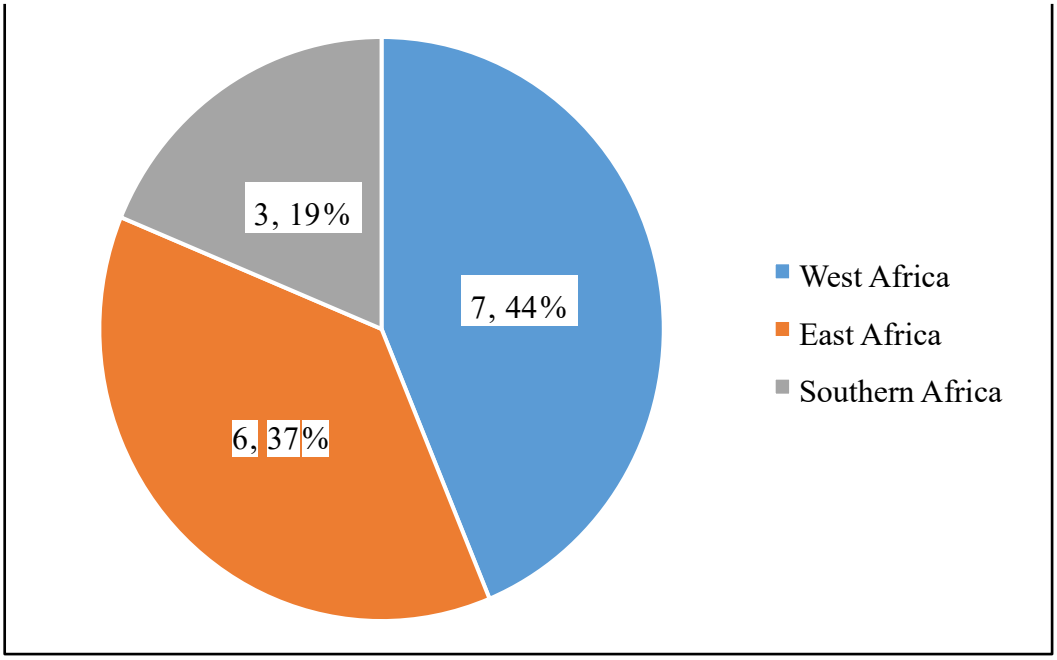

Figure 2: Geographical distribution of included studies

Study designs

The choice of predominantly quantitative designs in the studies is a reflection of the prevailing theoretical framework that the soft practices have a direct performance impact, which is often measured using regression or

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structural equation modelling (Kissi et al., 2019; Ssenyange & Chodokufa, 2024). On the other hand, the presence of qualitative and mixed-methods studies very much enhances the review by pinpointing the contextual, informal practices and implementing obstacles that are not readily captured through numerical indicators alone (Ebekozien et al., 2024; Xegwana et al., 2025).

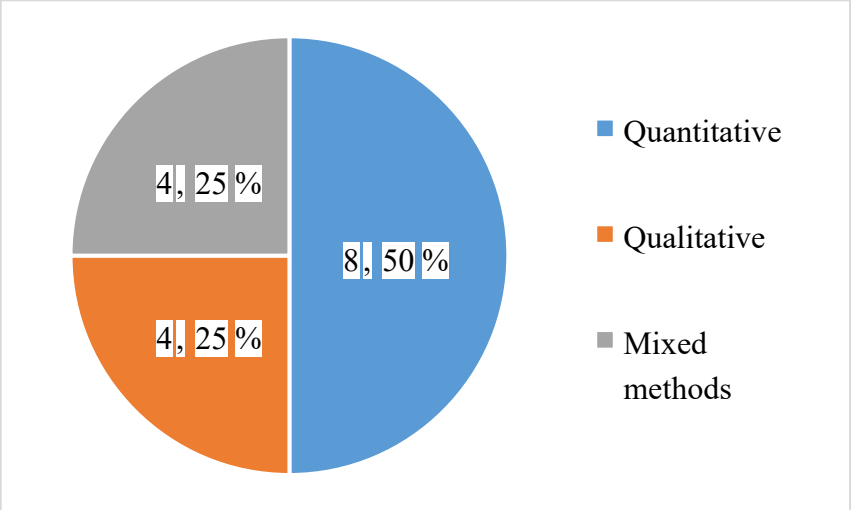

Figure 3: Distribution of study design of the included studies

Distribution of Publications by Year

The temporal distribution of the studies included clearly illustrates a heavy reliance on the post-2020 time frame, as three-quarters of the total evidence was published in the years 2023-2025. This implies that academia is increasingly recognising the role of soft project management practices in the delivery of African infrastructure, mainly as a counter to the previously reported persistent project under-performance (Tengan & Aigbavboa, 2017; Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2017).

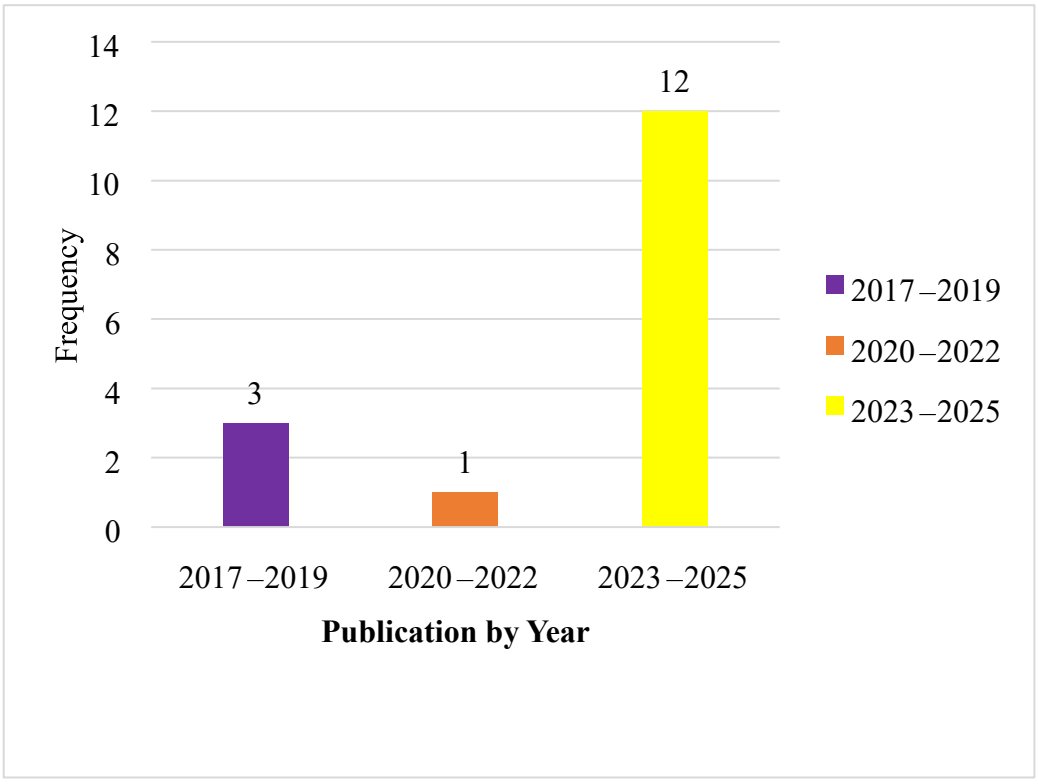

Figure 4: Distribution of Publications by Year

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Sector Focus Distribution

When looking at the different sectors as depicted by Figure 5 below, it is mainly construction and road infrastructure projects that one sees, pointing to the labour-intensive, multi-actor nature of these projects and their dependence on the relational practices of stakeholder engagement, communication and collaboration (Mukakarisa & Njoroge, 2024; Bondinuba et al., 2025). Although housing and social infrastructure have a lesser representation, they still contribute to the understanding of community-centric projects where the soft practices directly influence the public's perception and, thereby, the legitimacy (Xegwana et al., 2025; Rasebotsa et al., 2024).

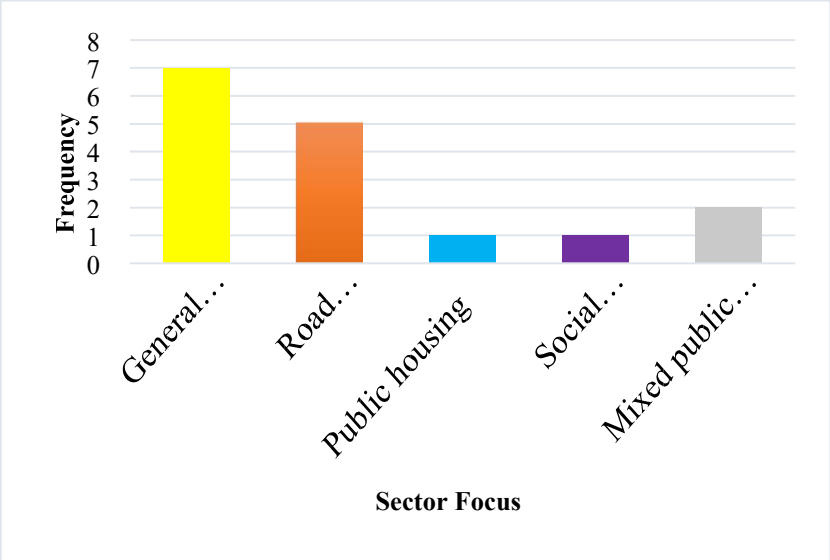

Figure 5: Distribution of Sector Focus of the included Studies

In total, this empirical distribution gives a strong backing to the theory of soft project management practices in different African infrastructure settings, showing the sectoral and methodological gaps that will be addressed in the following sections.

Dominant Soft Project Management Practices Identified

This part sums up the most critical soft project management (PM) practices from the studies that were mainly soft PM studies. Initially, the results are shown in a summary table, and then the integrated interpretation and discussion come in that connect the most common practices with project performance outcomes in African infrastructure contexts (ref: Supplementary file Table 4). The synthesis shows that the most widely used and common soft PM practice is stakeholder engagement, which is present either directly or indirectly in all 16 studies. Different studies conducted in Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya, Rwanda, and South Sudan have all indicated that stakeholder engagement is the main way to align project goals, expectations, and outcomes (Haar, 2024; Mukakarisa & Njoroge, 2024; Richu et al., 2025). This situation is a reflection of the fact that African infrastructure projects are always multi-actor, where government agencies, contractors, communities, and political actors overlap.

Engagement is followed closely by communication, which is viewed as both a separate practice and an enabling mechanism for other soft practices. In Ghana and South Africa, the researchers have found that inadequate communication is a major cause of mistrust, project delays, and community dissatisfaction; meanwhile, structured dialogue and feedback mechanisms are reported to enhance coordination and accountability (Tengan & Aigbavboa, 2017; Xegwana et al., 2025). In addition to this, several studies identify communication as a process of continual relationship building rather than merely being a one-way flow of information. Strategic roles of leadership and relational management are implied in a subtle manner, whereas they occur in public construction projects more frequently. The data from Uganda and South Africa suggest that leadership styles indirectly affect project success by determining the quality of the stakeholders' engagement and collaboration

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(Ssenyange & Chodokufa, 2024; Bondinuba et al., 2025). Thus, the implication is that leadership acts as a soft practice moving the project forward rather than a direct cause for performance.

In addition, the study results stress the gentle characteristics of monitoring and evaluation, particularly in the areas of participatory oversight and learning. Despite the existence of technical M&E systems, several reports indicate limited stakeholder participation in these processes, which impedes learning and accountability (Tengan & Aigbavboa, 2017; Kissi et al., 2019). On the contrary, studies that indicated participatory M&E as a stronghold also suggested positive influences on project quality, safety, and scope control (Kissi et al., 2019; Kakw'u, 2024).

Moreover, contextual sensitivity, including cultural norms, governance structures, and power relations, characterises all methods. Researchers assert that soft PM practices are the most efficient when they fit the local institutional arrangements instead of being merely uncritically transferred from the global project management model (Haar, 2024; Debela, 2022; Dick-Sagoe et al., 2023).

The findings reveal that rather than employing the soft PM practices in African infrastructure projects as distinct tools, they are seen as interrelated aspects of a systemic approach focused on building relationships. Their efficiency relies on the extent to which they are mixed, scheduled, and adjusted to the context, which is a point that will be elaborated in the following sections.

Implementation Mechanisms of Soft PM Practices

Findings from the studies reviewed indicated that soft project management practices are carried out through a combination of formal and informal methods. The formal methods consist of mechanisms that are ingrained in the project structures, while the informal methods are relational approaches that are influenced by the local institutional realities. The proportion of these methods used in governance reflects the capacity, sectoral norms, and the socio-political context of the region. A major formal method of project management is participatory planning, which is mostly evident in public construction, road, and housing projects. Involved stakeholders during planning have become a common practice in several institutions through such means as consultations, stakeholder mapping, and structured meetings. It has been shown by empirical evidence from Rwanda and Kenya that involving stakeholders in the planning period has a positive impact on project performance statistically. This is mainly because the stakeholders' expectations are aligned and resistance is reduced during the implementation (Mukakarisa & Njoroge, 2024; Kakw'u, 2024). Formal stakeholder identification and planning frameworks used by construction companies in Ethiopia and Kenya also led to the improvement of coordination and clarity of roles (Jaldesa, 2025; Richu et al., 2025).

Furthermore, feedback systems and communication channels have been identified as another important way to implement different ideas. These communication means are not restricted to progress meetings and similar reporting processes, but also include community forums and direct involvement of beneficiaries. At the same time, numerous studies indicate that the existence of such structured communication does not necessarily mean its effectiveness, as they often suffer from inadequate feedback, delays caused by bureaucracy, and so on. Talking about Africa, for example, the case of Ghana and South Africa reveals that feedback is a recurring topic; nevertheless, feedback that is not acted upon becomes a reason for the limitation of learning and not building trust (Tengan & Aigbavboa, 2017; Xegwana et al., 2025). On the other hand, wherever feedback loops are really incorporated into decision-making, enhanced stakeholder satisfaction and project outcomes are reported (Bondinuba et al., 2025).

Additionally, leadership styles are not a practice but rather an enabling mechanism. In Uganda, combining different leadership styles showed that they can indirectly affect a project's success through power relationship changes amongst the stakeholders, which ultimately leads to better quality of engagement, open channels of communication, and proper handling of conflicts (Ssenyange & Chodokufa, 2024). The same idea is present in the findings of South African studies, wherein the approaches of leadership that are characterised by collaboration and inclusiveness are found to have not only facilitated teamwork but also diminished conflicts (Ebekozien et al., 2024).

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Likewise, informal systems and networks, along with community engagement, are beyond formal systems and play a vital role, especially in areas with weak institutions or political complexity. Research conducted in Ghana, Cameroon, and South Sudan indicates that informal connections with community leaders, traditional authorities, and local power brokers are, more than anything else, the factors determining project acceptance and continuity (Haar, 2024; Dick-Sagoe et al., 2023; Richu et al., 2025). These informal mechanisms, while enhancing flexibility and trust, can also introduce risks related to elite capture and unequal participation if not managed transparently, thus creating a conflict of interest.

On the whole, the results indicate that the formal mechanisms offer the advantages of structure and accountability to the projects, whereas the informal ones provide the assessment and the capital of trust needed in the given context. Projects that can effectively integrate both approaches tend to be more successful in navigating the governance constraints, whereas dependence on either strategy hampers the effectiveness of soft PM practices in the delivery of African infrastructure.

Relationship Between Soft PM Practices and Project Outcomes

The studies that have been included in the review consistently indicate that soft project management practices have a measurable impact on project performance in different aspects, though the effects in terms of magnitude and nature differ by context, type of project, and the particular practice used. According to quantitative evidence, methods such as structured stakeholder engagement, participatory planning, and communication substantially restore the traditional project metrics, with time, cost, and quality being the main ones. In Rwanda, for instance, Mukakarisa and Njoroge (2024) evidence that participation in project planning, implementation, and monitoring boosts project performance by coefficient scores of 0.325, 0.268, and 0.409, respectively. Likewise, Kakw'u (2024) reports that stakeholder engagement ($\beta = 0.416$), together with monitoring, planning, and risk management, significantly increases road project outcomes in Nairobi. Moreover, in Uganda, Ssenyange and Chodokufa (2024) have revealed that the public construction project's success was remarkably impacted by the leadership styles through stakeholder engagement. These occurrences indicate that the benefits of soft practices measured by quantitative methods often lead to less frequent delays, cost overruns being less than originally planned, and improved quality of the products delivered.

The qualitative narratives further support the findings by emphasising the non-tangible advantages. The case studies from the two countries, South Africa and Cameroon, reveal that they have set the main inputs of trust, transparency, and alignment with the local needs through inclusive leadership, active feedback systems, and community engagement (Ebekozien et al., 2024; Haar, 2024). In the case of Ghana and South Sudan, the researchers Richu et al. (2025) and Dick-Sagoe et al. (2023) respectively explain that such project management involving effective communication and conflict management has not only satisfied the stakeholders and gained their social acceptance but has also indirectly enabled the project to last and be sustainable.

From convergence and divergence, the former are seen and the latter. Stakeholder engagement and communication are regarded as very important factors which consistently correlate with better outcomes in nearly all studies, irrespective of project type. On the contrary, divergences appear in the matter of leadership effects: in some projects, the presence of strong hierarchical leadership leads to adherence to schedules (Ssenyange & Chodokufa, 2024), while in other projects, imposing leadership discourages participation and thus the project is less effective (Jaldesa, 2025). Moreover, informal engagement mechanisms are vital in regions with weak institutional frameworks, such as the cases of Cameroon and South Sudan, where project success is heavily dependent on local connections and trust-building (Haar, 2024; Richu et al., 2025).

To sum up, the synthesis concludes that the soft PM practices do not take over the technical project management but rather play a very important role in shaping human and relational dimensions that directly and indirectly enhance project outcomes all over African infrastructure projects.

Contextual Enablers and Barriers

Without a doubt, African infrastructure projects have been greatly affected by the soft project management practices; whether the effect is positive or negative, the final decision is always made by the context. Good

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governance has come out as a decisive factor; quality of governance is the first thing you see, basic to soft project management effectiveness in almost all papers reviewed. In countries like South Africa, where projects like social infrastructure (Rasebotsa et al., 2024) or public housing in Stellenbosch (Xegwana et al., 2025) take place, the institutions and policies involved are cooperation and transparency-based, so the project roles, accountability and stakeholder participation are well defined. As a result, these practices of engagement and communication are further strengthened through the union of the two sides and the sensible settling of disputes.

On the other hand, sometimes political and bureaucratic issues get in the way of soft practice effectiveness. In the case of Ghana, Dick-Sagoe et al. (2023) and Tengan and Aigbavboa (2017) pointed out that among the reasons for project delays, cost overruns, and the existence of unreliable feedback systems were the activities of corrupt officials and the presence of administrative bottlenecks and inconsistent policy enforcement, which further cut down on stakeholder participation. In the same way, Debela (2022) mentioned that the PPP road projects in Ethiopia were prone to political instability and a lack of institutional support, thereby making it difficult to employ participatory practices.

The implementation of practices is also influenced by cultural norms and local social systems. In the case of Cameroon and South Sudan, studies reveal that (Haar, 2024; Richu et al., 2025) informal ties, deference to traditional authorities, and communal decision-making can promote trust and the use of soft practices even where formal governance is weak. Capacity constraints, on the other hand, were mentioned as the main cause of the lack of success in projects in Rwanda, Uganda, and Kenya due to insufficient project management skills or low literacy of stakeholders (Mukakarisa & Njoroge, 2024; Samwel et al., 2023; Ssenyange & Chodokufa, 2024), which hindered planning and feedback processes.

Besides, the availability of resources like time, financial investment, and technological support had a direct impact on the extent and quality of soft practices. According to Bondinuba et al. (2025), collaboration in Ghana requires a lot of resources for training, digital tools, and participatory forums; otherwise, the engagement was not consistent, and the impact was reduced.

All together, these results reveal that the effectiveness of soft PM practices depends not only on the governance, socio-cultural, and resource contexts but also on the need for customised strategies that integrate relational practices with local realities.

Configurations and Causal Pathways

Based on a configurational lens, the review establishes common combinations of soft practises and contextual conditions that are continually associated with positive project outcomes in African infrastructure projects. In various works, stakeholder engagement, participatory planning and systematic feedback mechanisms interacted well in environments with moderate to high levels of governance, community acceptance, and sufficient resources. As an example, Mukakarisa and Njoroge (2024) indicate that the high level of stakeholder participation in the planning, implementation, and monitoring stages, as well as capacity building, in Rwanda contributed to the quantifiable project performance changes ($\beta = 0.325–0.409$). On the same note, the models of collaborative engagement in Ghana (Bondinuba et al., 2025) also show that the synergy of stakeholder involvement and the use of digital tools and participatory decision-making can create sustainable project success.

On the other hand, projects with high-quality soft practises in weak governance or political instability usually had few successes. Dick-Sagoe et al. (2023) and Debela (2022) demonstrate that stakeholder engagement in itself will not be able to overcome the incidence of bureaucratic delays, corruption, and shortage of resources. Contextual contingency, in such instances, is reflected in practises that were applied and failed to produce desired results in terms of communication, leadership or conflict resolution.

Emerging context-mechanism-outcome (CMO) indicates that soft practices are mechanisms that enable trust, collaboration, and shared accountability, but they cannot work without enabling conditions, including institutional clarity, cultural fit and sufficient resourcing. Non-formal systems of governance and the cultural engagement norms tend to replace formal gaps in governance, especially in South Sudan and Cameroon (Richu et al., 2025; Haar, 2024). These trends highlight the fact that success is not usually an outcome of individual

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practise; rather, synergistic arrangements that are designed according to the local reality contribute to positive results, providing practical advice to the implementation of infrastructure delivery strategies in various African contexts.

Synthesis of Key Insights and Theoretical Implications

The review summarises the evidence to some upper-level understandings of soft project management in African infrastructure projects. To begin with, the stakeholder engagement proves to be one of the driving forces of a successful project, but its success depends on the quality of participatory structures, quality of leadership, and communication practises which are culturally aligned (Haar, 2024; Mukakarisa & Njoroge, 2024; Richu et al., 2025). Second, feedback systems and repetition monitoring are essential tools in terms of aligning the objectives of the project with stakeholder expectations, especially in situations that are marked by political or institutional fragility (Kissi et al., 2019; Tengan and Aigbavboa, 2017). Third, relations and culture-based practises tend to complement formal systems of governance, which emphasises the importance of thinking about relational and social aspects in project management beyond documented processes (Ebekozien et al., 2024; Xegwana et al., 2025).

In theoretical terms, these results confirm the stakeholder theory that places much focus on the careful management of stakeholder interests, power, and communication flows that have a direct impact on project delivery. They also apply perspectives of relational governance, which explains how trust, reciprocity, and social embeddedness can manifest themselves in the environment where weak formal institutions exist (Bondinuba et al., 2025; Samwel et al., 2023).

Importantly, African cases are knocking on the door of traditional PM assumptions that have been developed under Western contexts where formalised processes are normally dominant: in this case, contextualisation, cultural sensitivity, and formal-informal mechanisms are the main keys to the success of a project. Such lessons imply that global PM models need to incorporate context-dependent soft practise settings and that the way forward is to models that clearly acknowledge social, cultural, and institutional mediators of project performance.

Practical and Policy Implications

The results provide concise advice to practitioners and policymakers on how to improve the project delivery of infrastructure in the African context. To start with, it is possible to enhance alignment with the needs of the community by embedding structured stakeholder engagement throughout the project phases, namely, planning, execution, and monitoring, to decrease conflicts and increase stakeholder satisfaction (Haar, 2024; Ssenyange and Chodokufa, 2024; Richu et al., 2025). Practitioners are expected to embrace participatory planning processes, Vicious cycles of feedback, and culturally adaptive communication tools to achieve inclusiveness and transparency.

In addition, the building of leadership and capacity among project managers is essential because leadership styles play a direct role in the implementation and perception of soft practises by the stakeholders (Samwel et al., 2023; Jaldesa, 2025). Among the interventions that can make them stronger, training in conflict resolution, negotiation, and relational governance can be implemented.

Furthermore, policymakers ought to develop regulatory and institutional systems that promote the regular application of soft practises, including official principles of community interaction, reporting principles of stakeholder involvement, and responsibility measures of project control (Osei-Kyei and Chan, 2017; Debela, 2022).

Lastly, the importance of informal networks and socio-cultural norms can be used to make the policies more relevant: initiatives incorporating local leadership systems, traditional authorities and community organisations are more likely to deliver sustained results (Ebekozien et al., 2024; Xegwana et al., 2025). In general, institutionalising soft PM practises guarantee the increased efficiency, confidence, and stability in the African infrastructure projects.

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CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This systematic review summarised the evidence on soft project management practises in African infrastructure projects and emphasised them as very important in the enhancement of outcomes of projects. The soft practices (stakeholder engagement, leadership strategies, communication strategy, participatory planning, and conflict management) were identified in 16 studies across Sub-Saharan Africa and led to more favourable outcomes in terms of time, cost, quality, and stakeholder satisfaction. It has been shown that the success or failure of these practices is highly context-specific and depends on the quality of governance, political stability, cultural norms, resource availability, and institutional capacity. Configurational analysis also found that practical projects are frequently built on effective leadership, systematic stakeholder interaction, and culturally oriented participation processes, but the lack (or shallow implementation) of soft practices was associated with project delays, cost overruns, and stakeholder dissatisfaction. The review is also keen to point out the fact that formal and informal mechanisms may be complementary in the sense that, whereas accountability is taken care of by the means of formal tools (e.g., reporting frameworks, structured meetings), local buy-in and trust are provided through informal networks and cultural adaptation. Taken together, the results enlarge the scope of the stakeholder theory and the relativistic approaches to the management of relations by demonstrating that the African-specific sociopolitical and cultural circumstances alter the implementation and effectiveness of soft practices.

Recommendations

1. Institutionalise Soft Practices: Formulate through organisational policies and regulatory frameworks structured stakeholder engagement, participatory planning, and clear communication as the standard practice in all infrastructure projects.

2. Capacity Building: The project managers and the soft practices implementation teams will receive training in leadership, conflict resolution, and culturally sensitive communication.

3. Local Contexts Utilisation: To ensure that the project is accepted, legitimised, and sustained, traditional authorities, community groups, and informal networks will be involved in the governance of the project.

4. Monitoring and Evaluation: Mechanisms will be established that will enable the tracking of the use of soft practices as well as their effects, and therefore, the outcomes will be connected to ongoing improvement.

5. Policy Alignment: Infrastructure policies of governments and agencies should be harmonised with soft PM principles, thereby encouraging and rewarding the proactive establishment of stakeholder collaboration, feedback integration, and adaptive management.

6. Research Continuation: Longitudinal and cross-sector studies on the long-term benefits of soft practices in diverse African infrastructure contexts are to be encouraged, which will simultaneously solve the problem of a lack of evidence in the area.

This conclusion and recommendations framework turns soft project management into a reality that is not only a theoretical concept but also a practical, contextually adapted strategy for the whole continent.

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Disclosure statement

The author reports the absence of any personal or institutional connection which could have defined the behaviour or display of this review.

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Competing Interests

According to the author, there were no competing financial, professional or personal interests that might have influenced the objectivity of this work.

Additional information

The article is a systematic review of studies that relied only on peer-reviewed published articles. There was no primary data on which it was based, and thus, there was no need to obtain ethical approval.

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Supplementary File Table 3: Characteristics of Included Studies (n = 16)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Key References
Publication period	2017–2019	3	Tengan & Aigbavboa (2017); OseiKyei & Chan (2017); Kissi et al. (2019)
	2020–2022	1	Debela (2022)

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	2023–2025	12	Dick-Sagoe et al. (2023); Samwel et al. (2023); Haar (2024); Mukakarisa & Njoroge (2024); Bondinuba et al. (2025), among others
Geographical focus	West Africa	7	Ghana (Tengan & Aigbavboa, 2017; Kissi et al., 2019; Dick-Sagoe et al., 2023); Cameroon (Haar, 2024); Nigeria/Ghana-linked studies
	East Africa	6	Kenya (Samwel et al., 2023; Kakw'u, 2024); Uganda (Ssenyange & Chodokufa, 2024); Rwanda (Mukakarisa & Njoroge, 2024); Ethiopia (Debela, 2022); South Sudan (Richu et al., 2025)
	Southern Africa	3	South Africa (Ebekozien et al., 2024; Rasebotsa et al., 2024; Xegwana et al., 2025)
Sector focus	General construction	7	Ebekozien et al. (2024); Mukakarisa & Njoroge (2024); Bondinuba et al. (2025)
	Road infrastructure	5	Debela (2022); Kakw'u (2024); Richu et al. (2025)
	Public housing	1	Xegwana et al. (2025)
	Social infrastructure	1	Rasebotsa et al. (2024)
	Mixed public projects	2	Dick-Sagoe et al. (2023); Samwel et al. (2023)
Research design	Quantitative	8	Kissi et al. (2019); Ssenyange & Chodokufa (2024); Bondinuba et al. (2025)
	Qualitative	4	Ebekozien et al. (2024); Xegwana et al. (2025)
	Mixed methods	4	Mukakarisa & Njoroge (2024); Kakw'u (2024)

Table 4: Dominant Soft PM Practices Across Included Studies

Soft PM Practice	Description / Focus	Frequency (out of 16 studies)	Key References
Stakeholder engagement & participation	Identification, involvement, consultation, collaboration	16	Haar (2024); Samwel et al. (2023); Mukakarisa & Njoroge (2024); Richu et al. (2025)
Communication & information sharing	Transparency, feedback mechanisms, dialogue	12	Tengan & Aigbavboa (2017); Xegwana et al. (2025); Bondinuba et al. (2025)

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Leadership & relational management	Leadership styles, trust-building, and coordination	6	Ssenyange & Chodokufa (2024); Bondinuba et al. (2025)
Monitoring, evaluation & learning (soft dimension)	Participatory M&E, accountability, reflection	7	Kissi et al. (2019); Tengan & Aigbavboa (2017); Kakw'u (2024)
Collaboration & teamwork	Inter-organisational coordination, collective problemsolving	5	Ebekozien et al. (2024); Bondinuba et al. (2025)
Conflict management & negotiation	Managing competing interests, dispute resolution	4	Richu et al. (2025); Xegwana et al. (2025)
Governance sensitivity & cultural adaptation	Context-aware engagement, power relations	8	Haar (2024); Debela (2022); Dick-Sagoe et al. (2023)