Effective management and engagement of stakeholders is universally acknowledged as a prerequisite for project success. Empirical evidence indicates that opposition by stakeholders, especially external ones, can constitute a serious existential threat to projects and that much adversity towards projects may be avertable through appropriate strategies if the stakeholders are identified as such early in the project life-cycle. Consequently, accurate, comprehensive and timely identification of stakeholders is an important means of reducing project risk. However, research which answers the question of interest to practitioners, namely, how should a rigorous stakeholder identification process be conducted appears at present non-existent.

Based on an extensive literature review, informal discussions with project practitioners, and their long experience with projects across the globe, the authors attempt to address this knowledge deficiency regarding identification of stakeholders, both internal and external to projects. All stakeholder identification process aspects are discussed and critically assessed with particular focus on the large inventory of practical and proven identification methods developed by project theoreticians and practitioners over time. This research can thus serve as a useful orientation for project practitioners regardless of project category.

The authors’ research findings support the conclusion that identification of a project’s stakeholder community becomes increasingly difficult with increasing project contextual complexity and use of broader stakeholder definitions. A project’s internal stakeholders can always be identified but often this is not possible for its external stakeholders, especially on larger civil engineering and construction projects. Significant identification process shortcomings were observed unexpectedly even on some larger projects studied.