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Pathways for Public–Private Partnerships to Secure a Social License to Operate: Enhancing Legitimacy and Publicity

公私合作获得社会许可的途径：增强合法性和宣传性

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Abstract

Purpose: This study is motivated by widespread resentment toward public–private partnerships (PPPs) in both scholarship and practice, despite the fact that sustainable service delivery depends on citizen consent. This study aimed to examine the application of the social license concept to PPPs and its significance.

Methodology: This study is based on a thematic literature review designed to identify and analyze pathways through which PPPs secure a social license to operate. The analysis focuses on studies addressing stakeholder engagement, legitimacy, and public acceptance in PPP contexts, with the aim of synthesizing actionable principles for enhancing public trust and project legitimacy.

Main findings: PPPs have been adopted as strategic procurement mechanisms, public-policy instruments, and project-delivery models; yet post-implementation evaluations report mixed performance outcomes. A key reason for this variability is the failure of many PPPs to secure a social license to operate, which has at times provoked public dissent. Therefore, this study investigates how PPPs can obtain and maintain a social license to operate.

Applications: Drawing on an extensive literature review, it identifies clear pathways for PPPs to enhance legitimacy, foster community consent, and increase “publicity” – all critical factors for their long-term success.

Novelty/Originality: this study contributes in articulating practical strategies for acquiring social license at a time when PPPs face growing opposition, despite their transformative potential for society.

摘要：

研究目的：

尽管可持续的服务提供取决于公民的同意，但学术界和实践界对公私合作 (PPP) 普遍存在的不满促使了本研究的开展。本研究旨在探讨社会许可概念在 PPP 中的应用及其意义。

研究方法：

本研究基于专题文献综述，旨在识别和分析 PPP 项目获得社会许可的途径。分析重点关注 PPP 背景下利益相关者参与度、合法性和公众接受度的研究，旨在总结出切实可行的原则，以提升公众信任度和项目合法性。

主要发现：

PPP 项目已被用作战略采购机制、公共政策工具和项目交付模式；然而，实施后评估报告的绩效结果却参差不齐。造成这种差异的一个关键原因是许多 PPP 项目未能获得“社会许可”，这有时引发了公众的不满。因此，本研究探讨了 PPP 项目如何获得并维持“社会许可”。

应用价值：

通过广泛的文献综述，本文确定了 PPP 增强合法性、促进社区同意和增加“知名度”的明确途径——所有这些都是 PPP 长期成功的关键因素。

创新性/独创性：

尽管 PPP 具有改变社会的潜力，但当其面临越来越大的反对时，这项研究有助于阐明获得社会许可的实用策略。

Keywords:

Social license, public–private partnerships (PPP), community consent, infrastructure project legitimacy, stakeholder engagement, enhancing publicity, sustainable infrastructure delivery, citizen participation, social acceptance strategies

关键词： 社会许可、公私合作伙伴关系 (PPP)、社区同意、基础设施项目合法性、利益相关者参与、加强宣传、可持续基础设施交付、公民参与、社会接受策略

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1. Introduction

Changing societal expectations require governments to involve citizens in the co-production and delivery of public services. Over the past decades, governments have adopted new delivery mechanisms to co-deliver infrastructure, including roads, airports, railways, bus rapid transit systems, and energy projects. This approach brings government and private actors together through a strategic procurement method and policy instrument known as public-private partnerships (PPPs). PPPs are defined as long-term agreements, typically lasting between 5 and 40 years, in which the government engages private sector partners to deliver public infrastructure or services.

Governments worldwide adopt public-private partnerships (PPPs) for several reasons, namely financial constraints (Xu et al., 2015; Settumba et al., 2022), as well as flexibility, innovation, and technological advancement (Opara et al., 2017; Abman & Longbrake, 2023; Settumba et al., 2022; Nduhura et al., 2022). In PPP arrangements, the government transfers risks to private actors in exchange for incentives such as availability payments, while permitting the charging of user fees to citizens for services such as toll roads, airport services, driving permits, and education, among others. In reciprocity, private actors are typically obligated to finance, build, operate, own, and transfer the installed infrastructure after an agreed period.

Under public-private arrangements, the government enters into agreements to transfer significant risks related to design, financing, construction, operation, and maintenance of infrastructure to private actors, in return for incentives such as authorization to charge user fees from service consumers and availability payments from the government. Over a 30-year period, there has been increased engagement of private actors in the production and delivery of public services, as shown in Figure 1.

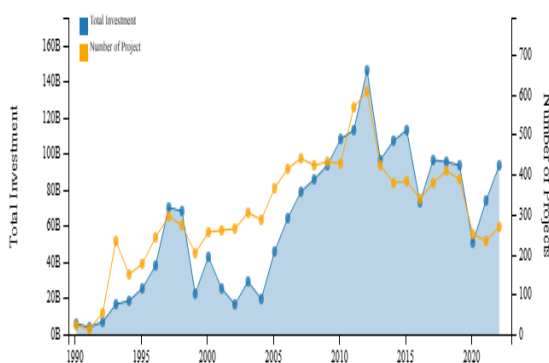


Figure 1. Private actor participation in infrastructure by PPI Data base 1990-2023 (World Bank PPI dataset, 2023)

As illustrated in Figure 1, there has been a significant increase in private actor participation since the 1990s, reaching a peak in 2012–2013 and a low point in 2019–2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It can also be inferred from Figure 1 that investment in public-private infrastructure (PPI) has increased, with nearly 200 new PPP projects signed. It is forecasted that new projects in the pipeline will be led by electricity, followed by roads, water, and sewerage in PPP investment (World Bank, 2023). According to Cedrick and Long (2017), 3.4% of total PPI investments were in developing countries. PPPs have been adopted as a mechanism to address societal challenges by leveraging the capabilities of the public, private, and social sectors (Henjewe et al., 2013). An empirical study by Tang et al. (2010) indicates that PPPs enable citizens to access services earlier than would be possible under traditional procurement methods.

Studies on PPPs acknowledge that they have played a significant role in increasing access to basic education (Twinomuhwezi, 2018). Other studies indicate that PPPs have enabled the delivery of infrastructure in education (Twinomuhwezi, 2018), healthcare (Settumba et al., 2022), and roads (Sapri et al., 2016). Despite the value that PPPs provide in the provision of infrastructure and services, they are critiqued for their lack of transparency and public engagement. The critique largely suggests that PPPs tend to prioritize the interests of private actors over the public interest (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Korab-Karpowicz, 2020). This has exposed PPPs to social risks.

Since the 1990s, most research on PPPs has focused on key thematic areas, including critical success factors, risk and risk allocation (Twinomuhwezi, 2018; Alonso-Conde et al., 2007), value for money analysis (Kweun et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2019), evolution and trends (Van Putten et al., 2018), and PPP application across sectors (Nduhura, 2019; Settumba et al., 2022; Akintoye et al., 2008; Effah Ameyaw & Chan, 2013). More recent studies, from 2019 onward, particularly in the post-COVID era, have shifted toward relatively newer areas. These include PPPs in crisis management and the co-production of vaccines during the global COVID-19 pandemic (Baxter & Casady, 2020; Vecchi et al., 2020; Wan et al., 2022), innovation (Meissner, 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Carbonara & Pellegrino, 2020; Shahbaz et al., 2020), e-Government (Palacio et al., 2019), stakeholder identification and management (Wojewnik-Filipkowska & Węgrzyn, 2019), and linkages with the Sustainable Development Goals (Akinsola et al., 2022; Berrone et al., 2019; Furumo & Lambin, 2020; Cheng et al., 2021). Relational aspects of governance are also emerging as a key area of inquiry (Casady et al., 2020; Kim, 2020).

Ex post evaluation studies on PPPs indicate mixed results regarding relational aspects such as legitimacy challenges (Arimoro, 2015; Castelblanco et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2021). For instance, PPPs have been critiqued for their lack of social license. This is particularly evident in an era where citizens are increasingly losing trust in institutions (Ramanna, 2023).

2. Literature Review

A “social license” refers to the outcome of interventions designed and implemented to reduce or prevent public opposition to a project (Gore, 2009; Yuan et al., 2018). Social license is considered an informal, psychological license granted by communities in which PPP actors or companies operate, based on the positive relationships these actors establish with local stakeholders (Wang et al., 2019). These relationships typically involve social investments and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, often led by private actors (Wang et al., 2019). While permits are issued as part of formal legal and regulatory frameworks, a social license, despite its informality, often confers *de facto* authority for a private company to operate within a given location or community.

When firms do not proactively implement actions that lead to a social license, they become vulnerable to social risks manifesting in the form of public rejection, infrastructure vandalism, and riots. Arimoro (2015) emphasizes that the engagement of community stakeholders is critical to the success of PPP arrangements. Using the Leki-Epe Express toll road in Nigeria as a case example, Arimoro (2015) argues that the failure to involve community stakeholders contributed to the collapse of the PPP project. Indeed, it is asserted that the absence of stakeholder involvement exposes projects to conflict and acrimony, potentially depriving the PPP of success. Failure to engage community stakeholders denies the project the synergistic benefits that diverse community groups and organizations can provide.

In furtherance of the academic debate on social risks arising from lack of community engagement, the absence of stakeholder involvement was identified during the construction of the Beijing 10th Water Plant and the Shanghai Da Chang Water Plant (Song et al., 2013). The project involved waste incineration and aimed to improve sanitation in the communities. It is argued that, like any infrastructure project, it had potential adverse environmental effects, but these could have been mitigated through appropriate safeguards. Furthermore, it is contended that the failure to provide information to affected communities led to public opposition to the projects (Song et al., 2013). Within the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the consequences of lacking a social license in PPP implementation have also been reported. For instance, literature indicates that in Zimbabwe and Maputo, Mozambique, PPP concessions and public protests emerged when importers and exporters denounced mandatory additional security checks and attracted taxes (Osei-Kyei & Chan, 2016).

In Uganda, the Bujagali PPP Hydropower Dam (250 MW installed generation capacity) faced community resistance during its construction phase. The resistance

was reported to stem from concerns that the project was not environmentally sustainable and involved unresolved land compensation issues (Gore, 2009).

Additionally, Umeme, the electricity distribution concession under a PPP arrangement in Uganda—widely regarded as one of the best-performing PPPs in Africa—also experienced public protests over blackouts (Maweje et al., 2013; Mbazira, 2013). Although the causes of these outages were largely beyond Umeme’s control, as the company depends on upstream generation and transmission entities to ensure stable supply, it bore the brunt of public dissatisfaction. This disconnect between operational constraints and public expectations may help explain why its concession is set to end in March/April 2025, despite its recognized contributions to improving Uganda’s electricity sector (ERA, 2024).

Similar trends have been observed in the United Kingdom (Soomro & Zhang, 2016; Henjewe et al., 2013). It has also been reported that the D47 and Trakia highways became subject to widespread public opposition due to the award of PPP concessions through non-transparent and non-competitive procurement processes (Cuttaree et al., 2009). In the Netherlands, as Van Ham and Koppenjan (2001) reveal, PPP infrastructure projects have, like elsewhere, attracted social protests. In Asia, and specifically in Vietnam, public protests against PPPs have also been documented (Van Ham & Koppenjan, 2001). In some cases, such protests have been successfully managed; in others, PPP projects have failed due to sustained public objections. Given that PPPs continue to serve as a deliberate government procurement and project finance strategy for expanding and improving public infrastructure, this paper acknowledges that securing a social license to operate is essential.

The objective of this paper is to examine the application of the social license concept to PPPs and its significance. We hypothesize that citizen involvement and participation in PPP projects constitute a key pathway to securing a social license, being an essential ingredient for PPP success. The failure to obtain a social license has exposed PPPs to public protest, resulting in project delays, service disruptions, and, in some cases, project abandonment—factors that contribute to the limited success or outright failure of PPP initiatives (Steinfeld, 2023; Sandler, 2023).

In addition, it is argued that megaprojects delivered through the PPP model are often met with either resistance or support from the stakeholders they affect. In an increasingly complex world, PPP projects face growing challenges in advancing unless they address broader community concerns, ranging from social to environmental issues. While considerable effort has been devoted to studying the functioning of PPPs, there remains limited research on the social acceptance of these projects and the pathways to securing a social

license while delivering public value (Weißmüller, 2019; Heo et al., 2022).

There is growing interest in PPP research that recognizes the need to increase publicness and secure a social license for PPPs (Steinfeld, 2023; Sandler, 2023; Rugge, 2019; Leclercq et al., 2020). These studies have contributed to expanding the body of knowledge on developing successful PPP projects. Notwithstanding, there remains limited understanding of the principles and actions required to manage social risks in PPP contexts. This paper therefore seeks to provide guidance on how to secure a social license and on the principles that support the pathway toward enabling PPPs to deliver greater public good. To this end, the study employs the concept of social license as a means to enhance publicity and legitimacy in PPP governance. The paper aims to achieve this objective by addressing the research question (RQ): What actions are implemented to acquire a social license in the context of PPPs?

3. Approach and Methods

This study employs a systematic literature review as its primary method of inquiry. A systematic literature review is a well-established research approach for synthesizing existing knowledge, identifying patterns, and uncovering gaps in scholarly discourse (Tranfield et al., 2003; Snyder, 2019). It is particularly suitable for exploratory and conceptual research, such as examining the pathways through which public–private partnerships (PPPs) secure a social license to operate.

To ensure comprehensiveness and rigor, scholarly articles were retrieved from academic databases including IBSS, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and Inderscience. The search focused on peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and policy reports published in English, with an emphasis on studies addressing PPPs, social license, legitimacy, stakeholder engagement, and public acceptance. Keywords such as “public-private partnerships,” “social license to operate,” “public trust,” “citizen participation,” and “legitimacy” were used in various combinations to identify relevant literature.

The selection process followed a thematic and analytical approach, prioritizing sources that contribute to understanding the relational, procedural, and institutional dimensions of social license in PPP contexts. By synthesizing insights from diverse geographical and sectoral cases, this review aims to develop a coherent framework of actionable pathways for securing and sustaining a social license in PPP projects.

3.1. Literature Search and Evaluation

Inclusion criteria. The study included peer-reviewed scholarly articles and policy-oriented publications that addressed public–private partnerships (PPPs) and their relationship to social license, legitimacy, stakeholder engagement, or public acceptance. The focus was on

empirical, conceptual, and case-based studies that provide insights into the pathways through which PPPs secure and sustain a social license to operate.

Studies were included regardless of discipline, encompassing research from infrastructure, energy, environmental management, health, education, information systems, and public administration. Only publications written in English were included to ensure consistency in interpretation. No time limit was imposed, allowing for the inclusion of foundational and recent works to trace the evolution of key ideas.

3.1.1. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted using keywords and phrases related to public–private partnerships and social legitimacy, including: “public-private partnership,” “PPP,” “social license,” “social license to operate,” “public trust,” “public legitimacy,” “publicity in PPPs,” “stakeholder engagement,” and “citizen participation.” These terms were combined using Boolean operators (AND, OR) to maximize retrieval of relevant studies. Initial screening was based on article titles and abstracts to assess relevance to the research question: What actions are implemented to acquire a social license in the context of PPPs? A manuscript was considered relevant if it addressed PPP governance, legitimacy challenges, community engagement, or public acceptance in infrastructure or service delivery projects.

The search was conducted across five major academic databases: Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, EBSCOhost, and Inderscience, which are widely used in public administration, business, and infrastructure research. These platforms provide access to peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, and policy reports across disciplines.

Advances in digital archiving and information retrieval have enhanced access to large volumes of scholarly data, enabling comprehensive and systematic synthesis of interdisciplinary research on PPPs and public legitimacy.

3.1.2. Screening for Inclusion

The abstracts and executive summaries of 84 identified documents, including journal articles, policy reports, and conference papers, were reviewed to assess their relevance to the research topic: pathways to securing a social license to operate in public–private partnerships (PPPs). Two researchers conducted parallel, independent assessments to determine inclusion. Each document was evaluated based on whether it addressed key themes such as stakeholder engagement, public trust, legitimacy, transparency, or community resistance in the context of PPP projects.

Discrepancies between the reviewers’ assessments were discussed and resolved through consensus. A total of 64 studies were deemed relevant and retained for full-

text analysis. These full texts were then obtained and subjected to a quality and thematic assessment to ensure their contribution to understanding the relational and procedural dimensions of social license in PPPs.

3.1.3. *Quality and Eligibility Assessment*

We screened the full-text articles to further assess the quality and eligibility of the included studies. The following databases were used as benchmarks for evaluating the quality and inclusion criteria: Scopus, IBSS, SciELO, Web of Science, and DOAJ. These databases are widely recognized by national and international research authorities as sources of high-quality, peer-reviewed scholarly literature. Preprints associated with these databases were also considered, provided they met the same quality standards.

A total of 12 articles were excluded at this stage due to failure to meet the predefined quality and eligibility criteria. Technical reports and online presentations were generally excluded from the review due to the absence of a formal peer-review process, with the exception of a limited number of high-quality reports supported by well-established and frequently cited references.

Quality and eligibility assessments were conducted independently and in parallel by two research assistants. Any discrepancies in their evaluations were resolved through discussion and consensus. Following this assessment, an additional 18 studies were excluded: four lacked a clearly described review methodology; four employed methodologies unrelated to public works procurement (e.g., reviews of clinical trials); one was excluded due to language (not published in English); and six focused on highly specific topics that fell outside the scope of this review. Full texts for three studies could not be retrieved despite extensive efforts.

After these exclusions, a total of 46 studies from the initial search were retained for full-text analysis and inclusion in the subsequent stages of the review.

3.1.4. *Iterations*

We used the back and forward search process to identify additional 3 articles. We also included 5 articles due to this process that have been included in the study.

3.1.5. *Data Extraction and Analysis*

For each included study, we extracted data relevant to the research questions guiding this review. Specifically, we focused on authors' perspectives related to the key themes and content areas addressed in the research questions.

Two of the researchers held regular meetings to discuss preliminary findings derived from the analysis of the selected papers. These discussions enhanced the interpretive rigor of the review by clarifying ambiguous or implicit ideas in the original texts, thereby ensuring a more coherent and accurate synthesis in the final

manuscript. The two co-investigators maintained consistent communication throughout the data extraction phase to ensure reliability and consistency in coding and interpretation.

Studies that presented challenges in interpretation or classification were discussed in detail between the co-investigators. This collaborative approach strengthened the analytical process, as it allowed for the refinement of emerging themes and a clearer articulation of the concept of social license—not only for the authors but also in preparation for the intended audience. We anticipate that the transparency and reflexivity embedded in our methodological approach will enhance the credibility and transferability of our findings.

Based on the thematic analysis, we present the key findings of the study, draw conclusions, and offer recommendations for best practices that can be adopted by both public sector agencies and private actors, particularly special-purpose vehicles (SPVs), to effectively secure and sustain social license within the context of public-private partnerships (PPPs).

4. Results

This section provides an overview of the concept of social license and its application in the context of public–private partnerships (PPPs). As social license is a predominantly qualitative and context-dependent construct that resists straightforward quantification (Parsons & Moffat, 2014), our analysis draws on established practices, emerging trends, and key case studies to explore its implications in PPP development. Building on the conceptual framework proposed by Boutilier and Thomson (2018) and supported by our thematic synthesis of the literature, we examine the role of social license in infrastructure procurement and offer insights into the broader concept of social risk within PPP projects.

We begin by discussing the core principles that underpin the acquisition of social license. This is followed by an analysis of the practical strategies required to gain public acceptance and, ultimately, secure formal or informal social license to operate in PPP contexts. Using an analytical lens informed by the literature, we present illustrative case studies—both of projects where social license was not obtained (leading to delays, opposition, or failure) and of those where it was successfully established. These examples, drawn from existing research, highlight the conditions, stakeholder dynamics, and outcomes associated with the presence or absence of social license in infrastructure development through PPPs.

5. Discussion

Given that this study identifies actionable strategies for managing social risks in the context of public–private

partnerships (PPPs), we begin by outlining the underlying principles that guide these actions. Prior research on PPPs has largely focused on identifying key variables influencing project success, with some studies employing quantitative methods such as factor analysis (Bagenda, 2023). This emphasis is understandable, as many of these variables have been extensively examined in the literature.

However, the principles that inform the implementation of social risk mitigation strategies remain underexplored. In contrast to the well-documented success factors, there is limited theoretical and empirical attention to the foundational principles guiding effective social risk management in PPPs. To address this gap, this section first discusses the core principles of social risk management, followed by an analysis of practical actions that can be employed in PPP contexts.

Where evidence from PPP-specific studies is limited, we draw on principles identified in other domains, such as extractive industries, infrastructure development, and community engagement frameworks, to assess their transferability and potential applicability to PPPs.

We begin the discussion by clarifying the concept of social license, often used interchangeably with social license to operate (SLO), which serves as a central theoretical lens for understanding legitimacy, stakeholder trust, and public acceptance in infrastructure projects.

Historically, the concept and practice of social license to operate (SLO) have gained global recognition, particularly within the domains of natural resource management and large-scale project development. Van Putten et al. (2018) define SLO as the informal social approval granted by affected communities for the development of natural resources—whether for private or public purposes. As an evolving governance mechanism, SLO implies that for any development initiative to proceed, especially in areas inhabited by Indigenous peoples or local communities, it must first obtain free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) – a principle enshrined in international human rights frameworks (Wilburn & Wilburn, 2011). This requirement underscores the ethical and procedural legitimacy of development projects.

The pursuit of SLO through the pathways discussed in subsequent sections is grounded in several key rationales. First, scholarly evidence suggests that involving communities in decisions that affect them fosters social value creation, enabling a more accurate identification and articulation of societal challenges (Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020). Such inclusive engagement not only enhances project legitimacy but also contributes to more sustainable and contextually appropriate outcomes.

Second, engagement processes as a pathway to securing social license have been widely recognized for their capacity to generate social value across a broad

spectrum of stakeholders, while simultaneously fostering community-based social approval that enables project advancement (Alford & Yates, 2016; Lehtinen & Aaltonen, 2020). In related research, Soomro and Zhang (2016) emphasize that sustained community support and patronage are critical to the long-term viability of infrastructure projects.

In practice, the effectiveness of social approval for any development initiative within a local community rests on a set of foundational principles that ensure genuine, inclusive, and enduring acceptance—key prerequisites for a legitimate and resilient social license to operate (SLO). However, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the specific principles that guide the successful implementation of social approval in the context of public–private partnership (PPP) infrastructure projects.

Despite this gap, such projects are frequently associated with significant social risks and adverse unintended consequences, commonly referred to as negative externalities, on community-held natural resources and assets. These resources are often vital to local livelihoods and deeply intertwined with cultural heritage and identity (Leclercq et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the absence of clearly defined and systematically applied SLO principles creates a critical vulnerability. Without integrating such principles into project design and governance, PPP actors with opportunistic tendencies may exploit information asymmetries inherent in PPP contracts. This could lead to an unequal distribution of benefits, where private gains are prioritized over public welfare, undermining the very social approval upon which the project's legitimacy depends.

To secure a social license, certain foundational principles must underpin any engagement pathway or initiative, as emphasized by Vanclay and Hanna (2019). These principles are essential for ensuring meaningful stakeholder participation, equitable outcomes, and long-term project legitimacy. Key among them are:

- **Trust and legitimacy:** Establishing mutual trust and perceived legitimacy among all stakeholders, particularly those directly affected or influenced by the project;
- **Free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC):** Recognizing the right of communities—especially Indigenous peoples—to self-determination and informed decision-making regarding development initiatives that affect their lands and livelihoods;
- **Shared benefits:** Ensuring that the economic, social, and environmental benefits of the project are fairly and transparently distributed among all stakeholders;
- **Principle of Responsible Investment (PRI):** Aligning project objectives with ethical, environmental, and social governance standards to promote sustainable and accountable development;
- **Clear timelines and expectations:** Setting transparent project timelines, deliverables, and

communication protocols to manage stakeholder expectations and foster accountability.

Together, these principles form a robust framework for building and sustaining social license in infrastructure development, particularly within the context of public–private partnerships (PPPs).

5.1 Pathways for Social License to Operate

Analysis of the actions that are undertaken to acquire the social license to operate was conducted. The results

indicate that there exist wide ranging approaches and considerations for organizations that attempt to secure an SLO. As shown in Table 1, the approaches range from safeguards, stakeholder participation and involvement, and communication management. The most popular approaches or pathways identified related to safeguards. Within the safeguards, environmental and economic livelihood restoration and enhancement were popular. A summary the pathways toward securing a social license are summarized and discussed in Table 1.

Table 1. Pathways for acquiring a social license to operate (compiled by the authors)

Dimensions of focus	Common actions	Author source
Environmental safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Appropriate legal framework ➤ Involvement of the relevant expertise ➤ Adequate public/stakeholder consultation and information dissemination ➤ Relevant institutional frameworks—clear roles and mandates ➤ Adequate financing ➤ Environmental and Social Management Plans ➤ Monitoring framework for environmental ➤ Public participation 	Aladağ & Işık, 2022 Park et al., 2020 Muwaza, 2019
Health Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Temporarily health centers and ambulances on projects ➤ Leave management ➤ First aid safety kits ➤ Counseling ➤ HIV testing and support ➤ Fully equipped 1st aid boxes 	PPDA, 2019 UNRA, 2019
Social Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Resettlement plans ➤ Social capital considerations in the resettlement action plans ➤ Religious center installations ➤ Sexual harassment policy ➤ Safeguarding policy and plans for the vulnerable population ➤ Reasonable adjustment policies and plans for example bereavement, ➤ Washrooms that are gender sensitive 	PPDA, 2019 UNRA, 2019 Gore, 2009
Safety Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Health and safety gear ➤ First aid kits ➤ Age of the fleet –not exceeding 10 years –Tilenga Oil Project in Uganda ➤ Wearing reflector jackets at work/site-Hima Lafarge Cement 	UNRA, 2019
Economic Safeguards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Pro poor user fees (NWSC/Umeme) ➤ Variable user fees 	UUL, 2020 UUL, 2021 NWSC, 2016
Education programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Scholarship programs ➤ Promotion of sports in schools ➤ Internships ➤ Education infrastructure development ➤ Education Tours ➤ Graduate apprenticeships/trainee programs 	BEL, 2022
Stakeholder involvement and consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Involvement and consultation of community stakeholders such as religious leaders and leaders of special interest groups such as women 	Arimoro, 2015
Stakeholder communication management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Information sharing with the community about the negative effects of the project and how they will be mitigated. 	Arimoro, 2015

Table 1 summarizes the pathways and practices that public–private partnerships (PPPs) around the world have implemented to acquire and sustain social license. These initiatives reflect strategic efforts to build trust, demonstrate accountability, and deliver shared value to local communities.

For example, Umeme, a Ugandan electricity distribution company operating as a special-purpose vehicle (SPV), has adopted several socially oriented practices. In collaboration with the national electricity regulator, Umeme introduced pro-poor tariff structures that provide subsidized electricity for the first 15 kWh

consumed per month, improving energy access for low-income households. Additionally, the company offers annual graduate training programs in electrical engineering and related fields, contributing to human capital development and skills transfer within the local economy.

Umeme has also taken steps toward environmental sustainability by replacing wooden utility poles with concrete ones. This shift aligns with broader climate resilience goals and helps reduce deforestation pressures linked to wood sourcing. As Arimoro (2015) notes, deforestation is a significant contributor to global climate change, particularly in tropical regions. By minimizing reliance on timber, Umeme's initiative supports both environmental conservation and community well-being, factors that reinforce its social license to operate.

5.2. Pathways Toward Acquiring Social License for PPPs

The study reveals that there is no single or universal approach to acquiring social license in public-private partnerships (PPPs). Rather, the analysis indicates that a comprehensive and context-sensitive set of community safeguards is required, spanning social, economic, environmental, and security dimensions. Communities consistently prioritize safety and security; however, they also demand clarity on how PPP projects will safeguard, enhance, or create new economic opportunities. Demonstrating tangible community benefits is therefore critical to securing public acceptance and, ultimately, social license.

A compelling example is the BEL Scholarship Program, launched in May 2015 by the Bujagali Energy Limited (BEL) Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV). The program aims to provide financial support to academically talented but economically disadvantaged students from communities affected by the Bujagali hydropower dam project, enabling them to pursue tertiary education. The scholarship covers full tuition fees, accommodation, and living allowances for the duration of the beneficiaries' studies. To date, BEL has awarded 12 scholarships to students from the project-affected area.

In addition to education, BEL has implemented several community development initiatives. The SPV has promoted youth engagement and physical well-being by donating sports kits and equipment to local schools. It also supports sustainable livelihoods through the provision of high-quality fishing nets to local fishermen, designed to target mature fish and minimize ecological disruption. This initiative contributes to the long-term sustainability of fish stocks, supports local employment, and aligns with broader environmental stewardship goals.

BEL further fosters public engagement by offering free educational tours of the hydropower facility by prior appointment. Recognizing access to healthcare as a

fundamental right, the company organizes biannual medical camps that provide free health screenings to community members. Services include eye and general health examinations, dental hygiene assessments, and evaluations of vital organ function (e.g., heart, lungs, digestive and immune systems). To date, over 1,700 individuals have benefited from these medical outreach programs.

Moreover, BEL acknowledges that a clean and safe learning environment is essential for educational success. In line with this principle, the company has supported school infrastructure improvements, including the renovation of dilapidated classrooms. For instance, Wakisi Roman Catholic Primary School – home to over 300 pupils – received renovations to its two-classroom block and teachers' office. Prior to the intervention, the building suffered from leaking roofs and cracked walls, forcing students to hold classes under trees. The improvements have significantly enhanced the quality of the educational environment and demonstrated the project's commitment to long-term community well-being.

Arimoro (2015) emphasizes that stakeholder buy-in can be effectively achieved through meaningful community involvement and consultation. This perspective aligns with the findings of Muwaza (2019), who underscores the importance of public participation in fostering stakeholder cohesion and minimizing opposition to public-private partnership (PPP) projects. According to Muwaza (2019), transparent and accessible communication, where information is shared in a manner that enables the public to make informed decisions, is essential for building trust and legitimacy. It is argued that such participatory processes facilitate mutual agreement among stakeholders on proposed actions, thereby enhancing the likelihood of project acceptance (Muwaza, 2019).

Furthermore, public participation can be significantly strengthened when engagement is conducted in local languages, ensuring inclusivity and comprehension among diverse community members. Arimoro (2015) also advocates for the deliberate inclusion of key community representatives—such as traditional and religious leaders, as well as leaders of marginalized or special-interest groups, including women, youth, persons with disabilities, and the local business community. Engaging these actors fosters synergy in perspectives and strengthens collective ownership of the project, which is critical for building the social cohesion necessary to secure and sustain social license in PPP contexts.

Beyond merely disseminating information, a key lesson from a water public-private partnership (PPP) project in China (Song et al., 2013) highlights the importance of establishing transparent communication mechanisms through which policy implementers proactively disclose the identified negative impacts of PPP projects, along with concrete strategies to mitigate

or eliminate these effects on affected communities. Such transparency is essential for building trust and demonstrating accountability.

To achieve community acceptance, the role of government is pivotal. Governments must provide an enabling policy, legal, and regulatory framework that mandates private actors in PPPs to conduct comprehensive environmental and social impact assessments (ESIAs). Furthermore, these frameworks should require the development of actionable mitigation plans and the allocation of dedicated budgets to address the risks identified in ESIs. Given the financial implications of securing social acceptance and maintaining social license, both public authorities and private partners—particularly special-purpose vehicles (SPVs)—must collaboratively identify, disclose, and integrate these costs into the overall financial model of the PPP.

The analysis also reveals that the effectiveness of stakeholder engagement depends significantly on the identification of appropriate community associations and legitimate representatives. However, in contexts marked by governance polarization or fragmented social structures, selecting authentic leaders and representative organizations remains a considerable challenge. As Van Ham and Koppenjan (2001) observe, this difficulty is often exacerbated by the “ills of representative democracy,” such as elite capture, lack of inclusivity, and contested legitimacy of representatives.

Therefore, it is critical to draw on lessons from the literature to design inclusive and adaptive engagement strategies that mitigate these risks, such as using participatory mapping of stakeholders, multi-level consultation processes, and independent verification of representative legitimacy. While stakeholder participation in PPP processes is widely recognized as essential for securing social license, previous studies caution that such engagement can be undermined by representational deficits inherent in democratic processes. Acknowledging and addressing these limitations is crucial to ensuring that participation is not only symbolic but substantively inclusive and effective.

6. Conclusion

Social license has the potential to fundamentally transform the success and sustainability of public–private partnerships (PPPs). This study contributes to the existing literature by examining pathways to achieving social license in PPP projects, with a distinct focus on synthesizing evidence from both developed and developing contexts. Unlike prior studies that offer broad overviews, this research provides a structured analysis of the principles and practices that underpin legitimate and enduring social acceptance.

The findings confirm that securing social license is not merely beneficial but pivotal to the success of PPPs.

However, such license is not granted automatically—it emerges from genuine public acceptance, which must be grounded in a clear set of guiding principles and actionable practices. These include: trust and legitimacy among affected stakeholders; free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) as a mechanism for self-determination; the shared benefits principle; the Principle of Responsible Investment (PRI); and the establishment of clear timelines and expectations throughout the project lifecycle.

While private actors may voluntarily pursue social license, the role of government is indispensable in institutionalizing this process. Public authorities should act as catalysts by establishing policies, legal frameworks, and regulatory requirements that mandate private partners, particularly special-purpose vehicles (SPVs), to actively engage communities and demonstrate accountability. This is especially critical under the lens of agency theory: since private actors operate on behalf of the state in PPP arrangements, public accountability ultimately rests with the government. When social license is not secured, and community opposition arises, the government is typically held responsible, regardless of the private partner’s actions.

Therefore, embedding social license into the governance architecture of PPPs is not only a matter of ethical practice but also a strategic necessity for long-term project viability, public trust, and equitable development.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, A.N.; methodology, A.N., and J.P.S.; software, J.P.S. and M.P.; validation, A.N., and I.K.T.; formal analysis, M.T.L. and M.P.; investigation, A.N., J.P.S., and I.K.T.; resources, M.T.L.; data curation, A.N.; writing—original draft preparation, A.N., M.T.L., and J.P.S.; writing—review and editing, T.M. and M.P.; visualization, I.K.T.; supervision, A.N. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare no conflict of interest.

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