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Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability of the Blue Economy in Mombasa and Lamu Counties, Kenya

Thuranira Mark Linturi[1*], Wilson Muna[1], Felix Kiruthu[1]
[1]Department of Public Policy and Administration, Kenyatta University, Kenya
*Corresponding author email: thuramark@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of stakeholder engagement on the sustainability of the blue economy in Mombasa and Lamu Counties, Kenya. The study was anchored on Common-Pool Resources (CPR) Theory. A pragmatic research philosophy and a convergent mixed-methods design were adopted. The study targeted 1,881 stakeholders across government agencies, local communities, NGOs, and the private sector, from whom a sample of 330 respondents was selected using purposive and simple random sampling. Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires and interview guides and analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analyses, and thematic analysis. The findings revealed a strong positive and significant relationship between stakeholder engagement and sustainability ($r = 0.796$, $p < 0.01$), with regression results confirming that stakeholder engagement significantly influences sustainability ($\beta = 0.167$, $p = 0.002$). However, the study also established that stakeholder engagement remains largely superficial, with limited inclusion of marginalized groups such as small-scale fishers, women, youth, and persons with disabilities. This exclusion undermines trust, reduces compliance, and weakens the legitimacy of marine governance systems. The study concludes that while stakeholder engagement is critical for the sustainability of the blue economy, its effectiveness depends on inclusivity, transparency, and institutional support. It recommends strengthening inclusive governance frameworks, enhancing institutional coordination, and promoting capacity building to improve stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy.

Keywords: *Stakeholder Engagement, Sustainability, Blue Economy*

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1. Introduction

The concept of managing commons has evolved from Hardin's (1968) "tragedy of the commons," which warned of inevitable resource depletion, to Ostrom's (1990) argument that collective action and inclusive governance can sustainably manage shared resources. These perspectives are central to the blue economy, where marine resources require coordinated stakeholder engagement, clear rules, and effective institutions. In coastal regions such as Mombasa and Lamu, sustainable management depends on how well stakeholders collaborate in decision-making, monitoring, and resource use.

Globally, the blue economy has emerged as a key driver of economic growth and environmental sustainability, encompassing sectors such as fisheries, tourism, and maritime transport (World Bank, 2017; OECD, 2016). Despite its potential, sustainability challenges persist due to overexploitation, weak governance, and the impacts of climate change, particularly in developing regions. In Kenya, the blue economy is a strategic sector with significant economic value, yet its sustainability is threatened by poor resource management and limited stakeholder coordination.

Existing studies emphasize that effective stakeholder engagement, supported by robust monitoring and conflict-resolution mechanisms, awareness programs, and resource pooling, is critical to sustainable marine governance (Keen et al., 2018; De Vente et al., 2016). However, empirical evidence on how these factors interact to influence sustainability in Kenya's coastal counties remains limited. This study therefore focuses on Mombasa and Lamu Counties to examine how stakeholder engagement can enhance the sustainability of the blue economy.

1.1 Problem Statement

Mismanagement of common marine resources continues to undermine the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy, with significant implications for economic development, food security, and livelihoods (Thoya et al., 2022). Despite existing regulatory frameworks, challenges such as weak institutional capacity, fragmented policies, and limited stakeholder engagement persist, particularly in coastal regions like Mombasa and Lamu (Otieno, 2023). Overfishing remains a major concern, with more than 30% of fish stocks exploited beyond sustainable levels and losses due to illegal fishing (Costello et al., 2016; FAO, 2018). These pressures are further compounded by marine pollution and climate change, which threaten marine ecosystems and their long-term productivity (Jambeck et al., 2015; IPCC, 2019).

Previous studies highlight that sustainability challenges in the blue economy are often rooted in weak governance systems and inadequate stakeholder involvement (Cisneros-Montemayor et al., 2021; Okafor-Yarwood et al., 2020). In East Africa, limited community participation, reliance on external interventions, and competing economic interests have constrained effective marine resource management (Cinner et al., 2012; Thoya et al., 2022). In Mombasa and Lamu Counties, these issues are reflected in ineffective monitoring, weak conflict resolution, and fragmented collaboration among stakeholders. This underscores the need to examine how stakeholder engagement can enhance governance processes and promote the sustainability of the blue economy in these coastal regions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Review

Common-Pool Resources (CPR) Theory provides a strong theoretical foundation for understanding how stakeholder engagement influences the sustainability of the blue economy in Mombasa and Lamu Counties, Kenya. CPRs, such as fisheries, mangroves, coral reefs, and coastal waters, are characterized by difficulty in excluding users and high susceptibility to overuse. Early perspectives, notably Garrett Hardin (1968), warned that individual self-interest leads to resource depletion ("tragedy of the commons"). However, Elinor Ostrom (1990) challenged this view by demonstrating that local communities can sustainably manage shared resources through collective action and well-defined governance structures. Her design principles, such as clearly defined boundaries, participatory rule-making, monitoring, graduated sanctions, and conflict resolution, highlight the central role of stakeholder engagement in fostering accountability and long-term resource stewardship (Ostrom, 2009).

In the context of Kenya's coastal blue economy, CPR theory underscores that sustainability depends on inclusive, adaptive, and polycentric governance systems that actively involve stakeholders, including local communities, government agencies, and private actors. Empirical studies in marine governance show that participatory approaches enhance compliance, equity, and adaptive management in fisheries and coastal ecosystems (Dietz et al., 2003). In Mombasa and Lamu, where challenges such as overfishing, habitat degradation, and resource-use conflicts persist, stakeholder engagement mechanisms, including community participation in decision-making, collaborative monitoring, and conflict resolution, align with CPR principles and are critical for sustainable outcomes. Thus, CPR theory explains that effective engagement not only mitigates resource depletion but also strengthens institutional legitimacy and resilience, ultimately supporting the long-term sustainability of the blue economy.

2.2 Empirical Review

2.2.1 Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

Proper management of the commons is essential for ensuring the sustainability of the blue economy. Sarker et al. (2018) conducted a thorough analysis of the potential of Bangladesh's blue economy by assessing its economic value, highlighting significant obstacles, and proposing a management framework. In addition to primary data acquired from interviews with coastal stakeholders, this study included secondary data from government publications, policy papers, and academic literature. The findings highlighted the value of ocean and coastal resources to the maritime economy, including their contributions to trade and resilience to natural disasters. But to promote sustainable growth in the blue sector, the research also made clear how important it is to address pressing problems, including pollution, human activities, increasing sea levels, and insufficient law enforcement.

Phelan et al. (2020) used the blue economy as a lens to examine community-based ecotourism (CBET) in Indonesia's Selayar Regency. In three villages- Jinato, Patilereng, and Barat Lambongan- the researchers employed qualitative approaches, such as direct observation and a variety of interviewing techniques. Their findings highlighted the need for more market access, better waste management techniques, and enhanced hospitality abilities. The study also emphasized how crucial it is to resolve waste management concerns and cultural tensions to support sustainable growth and save marine habitats.

2.2.2 Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

Sayce et al. (2013) investigated stakeholder engagement in marine protected areas and in the California planning process in the greatest depth. The researchers identified the participants as belonging to one of four groups: the first group comprised educators, the second group watchdogs, the third group advocates, and the fourth group collaborators. The research aimed to facilitate government agencies' connection with the public and the creation of trust between them, and to make information easily accessible so that more stakeholders would participate, through a mixed-methods approach. Nevertheless, before collaborative engagement is considered successful, a deep analysis of its effectiveness is required to address public support for the outcome of the process being referred to as a problem.

Depellegrin et al. (2022) developed stakeholder datasets for the Atlantic Area Sea Basin, comprising the countries of the United Kingdom, Ireland, France, Spain, and Portugal. The main objective of the research was to depict more clearly the Blue Economy stakeholder network, which the researchers did by classifying over 600 stakeholders into four groups: the first group was financiers, the second group was made up of service providers, the third group

consisted of researchers/innovators, and the fourth group was regulators/policymakers. Although the European Commission had recently enacted new legislation, a whopping 72% of stakeholders were still unaware of the Blue Economy's socioeconomic potential. Moreover, this study highlighted the issue of fair growth, identifying limited stakeholder awareness, dominance by certain industries, and difficulties in policy implementation as factors contributing to it.

2.3 Conceptual Framework

The relationship involving the two types of variables in the study is outlined in the framework. In this research, stakeholder engagement is the independent variable, while the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy is the dependent variable. Figure 1 illustrates the study's conceptual framework.

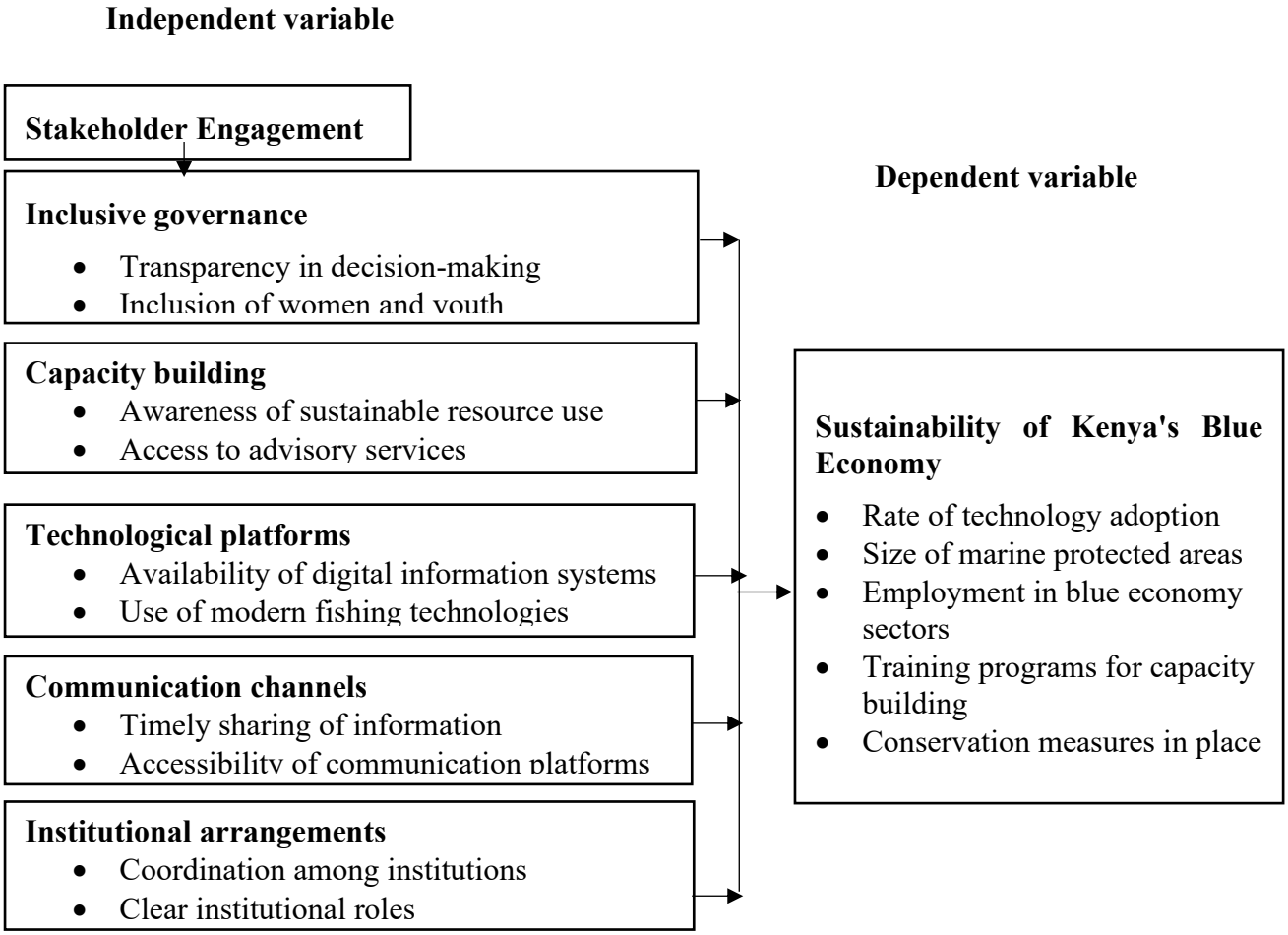

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

The study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy and employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, enabling the simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data to enhance validity and depth of understanding. The research was conducted in Mombasa and Lamu Counties, targeting 1,881 stakeholders across government agencies, local communities, NGOs, and private-sector actors, from whom a sample of 330 respondents was drawn using purposive and simple random sampling.

Data were collected using semi-structured questionnaires and interview guides, with a pilot study to assess validity and reliability (Cronbach's alpha ≥ 0.7). Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS (version 26) through descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analysis, while qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis. Diagnostic tests such as VIF, Breusch–Pagan, and Durbin–Watson were conducted to ensure model robustness. Ethical standards were upheld through informed consent, confidentiality, and research authorization from relevant bodies.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Descriptive Statistics on Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

The study aims to understand how respondents perceived the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy. It focused on the link between economic growth and marine conservation. Participants shared their opinions on whether the financial benefits from marine resources were greater than the conservation needs, whether there were enough resources to support conservation efforts, and how tourism contributed to coastal livelihoods.

Respondents also gave their perception on environmental issues, such as plastic waste and the lack of community involvement in cleanup activities. They highlighted governance issues, including the need for strong laws to reduce pollution and the impact of community participation on compliance with maritime rules. These questions offered valuable insights into how stakeholders viewed the trade-offs, challenges, and opportunities in managing marine resources sustainably in Mombasa and Lamu counties.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

Statement	N	Max	Mean(M)	Std. Dev
Making money from the marine resources is seen as more important than protecting them.	307	5	3.77	1.326
I believe Kenya can grow its blue economy by balancing the need to make money with conservation.	307	5	3.96	1.050
Sometimes, financial resources to support the conservation of marine resources are not enough.	307	5	3.93	1.165
I feel the blue economy should focus on bringing more tourism money to coastal areas.	307	5	3.99	1.130
I feel that plastic waste is still a big problem along our coast	307	5	4.08	1.096
Few people in my community take part in activities like beach cleanups to protect the ocean	307	5	3.90	1.196
I believe having strict laws and regulations can prevent pollution in our coastal areas.	307	5	4.17	1.054
Sometimes, failure to involve local communities in decision-making reduces compliance with maritime laws.	307	5	4.10	1.083
Valid N (listwise)	**307**			

The data presented in Table 1 (M = 3.77, SD = 1.326) confirm the view that economic benefits are the main goal, while environmental protection is the least prioritized area. A participant in the study stated that, "*Profit will always be the top concern for most users of the ocean, which results in practices that are harmful to the environment, for example, overfishing and pollution"* (R002). The dispute between conservation and people's livelihoods is the key problem in managing marine resources. The 'tragedy of the commons' theory by Hardin (1968), to some extent, explains the situation. If people continue to think about 'me, myself, and I' regarding the resource, i.e., if they think it is their right to take out as much as they can use, the fisheries will soon get depleted. The respondents pointed out that overfishing, the destruction of the marine ecosystem caused by the use of harmful gear, and a lack of strict regulations contribute to the depletion of fisheries. Nonetheless, contrary to Hardin's original proposition that resource collapse is inevitable, the data indicate that alternative practices are often a direct consequence of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to technology. In these situations, overexploitation is no longer the result of neglect but rather a survival strategy. This perception, in fact, challenges the notion that local people will always be opponents of conservation. Rather, it demonstrates how economic challenges limit ecological options. Kohler and Brondízio (2017) warn that conservation efforts that do not address these challenges will face backlash from local people. Jamil et al. (2024) and Roberts (2021) maintain that the formulation of policies for the blue economy must interweave economic, ecological, and social goals. Likewise, Du (2024) proposes that if fishing practices are selective and ethical, they will not only satisfy present needs but also support long-term sustainability, provided they are affordable and accessible to underprivileged communities.

Positively, the findings (M = 3.96, SD = 1.050) indicate that the majority of respondents consider economic growth and environmental protection to be mutually supportive. One of the respondents stated, *"Some, like in Kiunga, conduct shift fishing. This allows fish to reproduce, seagrass to grow back, and coral reefs to recover."* (R002). Traditional techniques such as rotational fishing, seasonal closures, and breeding zone preservation reveal local conservation systems that support Ostrom's view of commons management. These are situations in which communities can develop sustainable management methods without external influence. However, the formal government often neglects these systems, favoring external models at the expense of local knowledge. Ali and Sulistiyono (2025) point out that well-managed marine resources can be a great source of national welfare. Meanwhile, Bennett et al. (2019) argue that ecological targets should be set with fairness and equity in mind. Marine spatial planning tools (Renaldo et al., 2024) are well-positioned to address conflicting needs, but their credibility hinges on incorporating community views rather than ignoring them.

Insufficient funding and limited technical resources (M = 3.93, SD = 1.165) are another key barrier. The lack of modern fishing gear, storage facilities, and safety equipment makes it hard to increase output while also denying access to sustainable practices. This lack of funding is a major problem that negatively affects the entire ecosystem. Communities sometimes have no choice but to resort to unsustainable practices because the alternatives are too expensive. Moreover, conservation projects that rely on unstable government funding or external donations often lead local communities to depend on donors rather than build their resilience. The case studies from Ghana and the Philippines show that governance failures and unstable funding critically undermine fisheries management (Okyere et al., 2023). Parker et al. (2024) and Bohorquez et al. (2023) are other researchers who have concluded that problems with localities' capacity to manage their resources negatively affect marine protected areas (MPAs), even when they are community-supported. These trends indicate that the conservation

challenges are equally political, economic, and ecological. The ongoing underfunding of coastal management clearly indicates the low priority given to fishing communities in the overall development agenda. Unless there are resource reallocations and institutional supports, conservation might intensify inequalities rather than eliminate them.

Tourism (M = 3.99, SD = 1.130) is identified as a primary component of the blue economy, offering money, jobs, and involvement in conservation activities in return, but the findings also indicate that these advantages are not equally distributed, and the local inhabitants are the ones without a say in the decision-making process and are relegated to low-paid, seasonal jobs. Such a situation hinders tourism's potential as a sustainable development plan, as it reinforces social and economic inequalities. Evans et al. (2023) underscore the importance of giving coastal communities a role in governance structures, while case studies from Indonesia and Yogyakarta (Irhamni & Astuti, 2024; Airawati et al., 2023) reveal that tourism can fulfill both ecological and social objectives when communities are true partners. On the other hand, exclusionary practices may convert tourism into an avenue for the elite and outsiders to seize resources. Rasowo et al. (2020) support implementing strategies such as participatory planning, education, and transparent data sharing among stakeholders as the most effective means of tackling these challenges. These revelations make it clear that tourism can only be a partner in sustainability if the division of benefits, responsibilities, and decision-making power is fair.

Plastic pollution has emerged as one of the most pressing problems (M = 4.08, SD = 1.096). Respondents pointed to the negative effects on ecosystems, human health, and local economies. It comes from various sources, including household waste, tourism, fishing, and boating, but the persistence of the issue indicates governance failures rather than individual carelessness. Poor waste collection systems, ineffective enforcement, and a lack of public education increase pollution levels and force communities to improper disposal as their only option. Studies comparing Ghana, Peru, and even developed countries like the UK (Mensah, 2021; Guidino et al., 2023; Olatunji et al., 2022) have shown that inadequate infrastructure and weak enforcement are problems everywhere, not just in certain places. Awareness has been raised through similar initiatives, such as the plastic dhow and community clean-ups, but respondents still saw these efforts as scattered and insufficient. In the absence of system-wide changes in waste management and law enforcement, these efforts are but minor compared to the size of the problem. Plastic pollution control still needs to be prioritized at the governance, infrastructure, and accountability levels, rather than relying on isolated volunteer efforts.

Participation in conservation activities, such as clean-ups, was rated rather low (M = 3.90, SD = 1.196). This limited participation should be interpreted as a consequence of structural exclusion, rather than an expression of apathy. When conservation activities are managed by hotels, NGOs, or other external organizations and the community is not consulted, neighborhood groups tend to perceive caring for the environment as the outsiders' duty. Peer et al. (2022) and Morris et al. (2024) observe that top-down approaches reduce community trust and long-term compliance. Ward et al. (2018) and Osore et al. (2022) argue that logistical difficulties and power imbalances result in the marginalization of less fortunate groups. This exclusion not only undermines the legitimacy of conservation but also negatively influences its effectiveness and sustainability. Such findings support grassroots approaches that prioritize community engagement in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these initiatives, ensuring that conservation efforts align with local needs and capacities.

The support for stricter environmental laws and regulations was very strong (M = 4.17, SD = 1.054). People are acknowledging the importance of these laws. The interviewees demanded very strict regulations and strict enforcement, but at the same time, they talked about punishment to deter. On the surface, the argument appears to be simple: more laws, more sustainability. But the interviews indicate a very complicated situation. Participants said that weak and inconsistent enforcement, not the lack of laws, was the real problem. The issue is made more difficult by political interference at times. One of the respondents said, *"foreign trawlers continue to overfish because of the enforcement interferences"* (R011). Another pointed out, *"the observers are mostly compromised because they depend on the very people they are monitoring*" (R005). There is a contradiction: communities demand stricter laws, yet realize that if there is corruption, selective enforcement, and a lack of political will, laws cannot help. Community perspectives add another dimension. Some people support imposing harsher penalties, while others claim that punishments that disregard community participation will only alienate locals and reduce compliance. The question is not whether laws are necessary, but whether Kenya's governance system is strong enough to make regulations effective. Stricter laws can only prove to be symbolic rather than transformative if the issues of corruption, a weak monitoring system, and a lack of genuine community involvement are not tackled. Kerubo et al (2021) argue that localized measures increase compliance. Raha et al. (2021) emphasize the role of public engagement in developing effective frameworks. Similarly, Sarwar et al. (2021) and Willis et al. (2022) show that regulatory systems succeed only when institutions earn trust and demonstrate resilience. In weak governance situations, tough laws become gestures rather than tools for meaningful change.

The exclusion of communities from decision-making processes is considered a major reason for noncompliance with maritime laws, as noted by the respondents (M = 4.10, SD = 1.083). A number of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with governance structures that do not take into account local residents' opinions. They pointed out that the Beach Management Units (BMUs) do not work as they should. Yes, policymakers say the participatory structures are in place, but communities tend to see them as either merely symbolic or controlled by special interests. Trust and compliance are dwindling due to this perception. The interviews provided insight into several obstacles. One participant said, *"BMUs are supposed to give ownership, but they are not consistent in their response. The lack of training is intentional to prevent locals from getting knowledge"* (R002). Another participant noted, *"There is very little participation in stakeholder discussions; young people and women are not invited" (R012).* Such statements imply that participation daily favors the elites or the politically connected, while many local people remain shut out of the decision-making process. The irony is clear. Norms intended to be benevolent are applied intrusively and become a source of conflict when the community lacks real ownership. Ostrom's (1990) theory of collective action emphasizes that co-designing and trust are the only ways for rules to succeed. Thoya et al. (2022) also caution that ignoring small-scale fishers is tantamount to killing both livelihoods and regulatory compliance. Empirical data from various studies support this view. Francolini et al. (2023), Nugraha (2023), and Buana and Barlian (2023) show that participatory governance strengthens legitimacy and compliance. In the same vein, Clark and Humphreys (2020) pointed out that inclusive decision-making is a prerequisite for sustainable marine management in the long run. Thus, the entire body of evidence suggests that the government of Kenya cannot, however, rely solely on sanctions and strict regulation as means of conducting effective maritime governance. Community participation, by contrast, is a decisive factor in shaping the practice of legal frameworks.

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The sustainability of the blue economy in Kenya is not merely a technical issue of conservation practices or regulations; it is a political problem shaped by fairness, trust, and legitimacy. Economic hardship, underfunding, exclusionary governance, and poor enforcement are always prevailing, rendering well-meaning initiatives unsuccessful. Addressing these challenges requires developing solutions that involve the community rather than top-down approaches, solutions that acknowledge community knowledge, that share decision-making power, and that provide the infrastructure support for sustainable practice. It is only in this manner that marine conservation can promote both ecological health and social justice.

4.2 Descriptive Statistics on Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

The sustainability of the blue economy relies heavily on the active participation of all stakeholders in decision-making and management processes. In this study, respondents shared their views on how well inclusiveness is practiced in the management of marine resources. The questions addressed opportunities to share ideas, clarity in consultation procedures, cooperation among stakeholders, information-sharing timelines, and the involvement of local communities. The study also focused on whether marginalized groups, such as women, youth, persons with disabilities, and small-scale fishers, are adequately included, and if local leaders give feedback to their constituents.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics on Stakeholder Engagement

Statement	N	Max	Mean (M)	Std. Dev
Sometimes I am not given opportunities to share my ideas on how marine resources should be managed.	307	5	3.72	1.346
The procedure for stakeholders to provide their views on marine activities is unclear.	307	5	3.90	1.184
Some stakeholders don't cooperate well with others in managing marine resources.	307	5	3.88	1.220
Sometimes, information about participating in activities concerning managing marine resources is not shared in time.	307	5	3.89	1.195
Failure to involve the local community in making decisions on managing marine resources sometimes results in conflicts	307	5	4.05	1.076
Sometimes groups like women, youth, persons living with disability, or small-scale fishers are often left out of decision-making about managing marine resources.	307	5	3.90	1.264
Sometimes our Local leaders and representatives fail to provide feedback on discussions related to managing marine resources.	307	5	3.99	1.191
Valid N (listwise)	307			

The results in Table 2 indicate that although stakeholder involvement is regarded as very important for the proper management of marine resources, it is not only poorly but also inconsistently implemented. The study demonstrated that a significant number of participants felt they were not involved in the decision-making process regarding resource management (M = 3.72, SD = 1.346). This situation is further complicated by the fact that decision-making is almost always in the hands of political elites, Beach Management Unit (BMU) officials, or state-supported institutions, resulting in the voices of common fishers and marginalized groups being hardly heard. One of the respondents commented on this scenario: *"BMU only responds to those who benefit them with fish; lacks impartiality"* (R001). The inability of small-scale fishers and marginalized groups to exert any influence is a result of the exclusion process, which undermines the very foundation of governance and further widens the gap of mistrust between the coastal communities and the government. When participation is perceived as unimportant or predetermined, the acceptance of conservation measures tends to diminish. These results are consistent with the global criticism of top-down governance, in which a lack of community input leads to weak policies and poor outcomes (Ullah et al., 2022). Relano and Pauly (2023) also agree that without genuine engagement, marine protected areas could end up being "paper parks" in name only, lacking real legitimacy or enforcement, existing only as theoretical categories.

The problem becomes more serious due to uncertainty and a lack of understanding of the processes involved in gathering community feedback. The people who gave feedback mentioned confusion within governance forums, inconsistent communication, and limited opportunities to participate in decision-making (M=3.90, SD=1.184). Sometimes information was shared selectively, and other times it was shared too late, and those affected by the regulations did not receive the proper information. This situation of non-disclosure undermines trust and turns the principles of participatory governance on their head. To illustrate, a respondent mentioned, *"Fishermen feel left out of key decision-making despite being primary stakeholders"* (R008). The gap between the supposed participatory processes and the real experiences goes a long way toward creating distrust of engagement initiatives. The data suggest the need for reform in institutional frameworks; otherwise, participation may remain a token exercise rather than genuine engagement. Ostrom's principle of collective choice arrangement, through participants or actors, for the governance of common resources (Ostrom, 1990), is reiterated here. Micheni et al. (2023) argued that vague engagement frameworks hinder coastal development. Siswanto and Rosdaniyah (2023) also highlight that fragmentation in engagement practices weakens the blue economy's initiatives in Indonesia. These trends align with Kelly's (2022) assertion that coastal governance requires integrated systems to coordinate diverse actors and their responsibilities.

Collaboration among the various parties involved is also weakened by distrust in institutions and issues with the organizational structure. The low average score for collaboration among stakeholders (M = 3.88, SD = 1.220) indicates that concerns about bias in the BMUs, elite control of the stakeholder forums, and erratic policy enforcement are among the widespread issues. Instead of being open to participation, some forums are said to be run by "meeting entrepreneurs" who exploit engagement opportunities for their political or personal gain. To some extent, conflicts between agencies with overlapping functions, coupled with weak accountability, contribute to feelings of exclusion among stakeholders. These findings align with Hatenboer et al. (2023), who associate policy uncertainty with failure in collaboration, and with Lange and Cummins (2021), who argue that unresolved structural and ethical tensions cause conflicts in governance. Thus, the evidence suggests that without trust- and

accountability-building methods, participation platforms might instead entrench governance disputes rather than resolve them.

Communication failures increase the severity of these problems. Respondents to the survey noted that meeting schedules often clashed with fishing activities and tidal cycles. The use of either an elite network or digital communication made the fishers and the groups at risk isolated (M = 3.89, SD = 1.195). This was accompanied by repeated complaints about poor communication: "There was no proper notification of the stakeholders in time about their need to join the forums regarding the marine matters" (R002) and "I talk, but when they go, they do not take any action afterward." The concurrence of these findings indicates that closing feedback loops is not only a matter of aesthetics but a requirement for trust and collaboration. Communication practices that are misaligned in small-scale fisheries limit engagement and erode the legitimacy of governance (Obregón et al., 2020). Nochete and Baleña (2024) emphasize that communication must be adapted to the local context to ensure meaningful involvement. Thus, communication failures are not only technical issues but are also the primary obstacles to inclusive governance.

The effects of exclusionary governance are very large. Respondents were easily assigned to inadequate engagement, which was cited as a reason for conflict by a high percentage, especially when large-scale projects started without sufficient consultation (M = 4.05, SD = 1.076). The Lamu Port development was often cited as a case in which resistance stemmed from ignorance of traditional marine uses. The Lamu Port case demonstrated that poor consultation led to distrust and resistance, undermining both conservation goals and community relations. This evidence implies that exclusion is not only a procedural error but also a cause of long-term conflict. One could say that the necessity of meaningful engagement is not merely a matter of justice but also a question of sustainability. The conservation and economic initiatives without it are likely to get buried under local resistance. Such disputes have been noted in other regions, too. Ongare et al. (2024) mention the conflicts between salt companies and coastal communities in Kenya. Ayilu et al. (2023) discuss the case of artisanal fishers in Ghana who face threats due to inadequate regulation. These instances illustrate that engagement failures not only lead to non-compliance but also trigger open conflict, thus jeopardizing both livelihoods and the legitimacy of the policies.

Governance obstacles are heightened by the exclusion of marginalized groups. The study's findings revealed that women, youth, people with disabilities, and small-scale fishers are the groups that decision-makers usually do not consider (M = 3.90, SD = 1.264). Qualitative inputs demonstrated that women's input is mostly ignored, youth participation is merely a show, and individuals with disabilities suffer both structural and mental barriers. These remarks align with those of Thoya et al. (2022), who state that Kenya's blue economy has not effectively integrated small-scale fishers and women, even though they are the most important. Across the world, there is a consistent trend of women's underrepresentation in fisheries management, despite their contribution of almost 50% to the industry's labor force (Chambon et al., 2023). The elimination of these groups not only narrows the range of views but also casts doubt on the fairness and legitimacy of marine governance, as Rohe et al. (2018) and de la Torre-Castro (2019) have pointed out.

The very credibility of engagement processes is often undermined by insufficient follow-up and feedback. A majority of participants reported that it was very rare to see the outcomes of such processes communicated, which led them to believe that their input was of little value (M = 3.99, SD = 1.191). This *"engagement without impact"* case is not a singular one: Horowitz et al. (2018) indicate that communication disparities prevent people from acting together,

whereas Perea-Muñoz et al. (2022) demonstrate that timely feedback increases stakeholder satisfaction and support. Condie et al. (2023) also stress that long-term communication strategies are crucial in building trust. Without these mechanisms, engagement might become mere symbolism rather than actual participation, further eroding trust in governance institutions.

The results indicate that the proper involvement of stakeholders is the main factor for the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy. Institutional Theory suggests that legitimacy, trust, and good governance practices are the essential factors for participation. Common-Pool-Resources Theory emphasizes that flexible, participatory, and inclusive decision-making is essential for the long-term management of marine resources. Problems in stakeholder engagement, such as exclusion, poor communication, and low participation, will negatively affect both institutional legitimacy and the concept of collective action. This will then result in conflicts, mistrust, and lower compliance. Thus, the prosperity of the blue economy in Kenya relies on implementing engagement methods that are inclusive, transparent, and accountable, and that enable all stakeholders to be meaningfully involved in the resource governance process.

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The study conducted a correlation analysis to assess the association between stakeholder engagement and the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy. The findings were presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation between Stakeholder Engagement and Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

		Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy	Stakeholder Engagement
Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy	Pearson Correlation	1	.796**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	307	307
Stakeholder Engagement	Pearson Correlation	.796**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	307	307

****. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).**

Table 3 illustrates the connection between stakeholder involvement and the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy. The study revealed a strong, positive, and significant correlation ($r = 0.796$, $p < 0.01$). This indicates that meaningful stakeholder participation in decision-making, monitoring, and implementation processes is strongly associated with more sustainable blue economy outcomes. When local communities, women, youth, persons with disabilities, and small-scale fishers provide ideas, participate in discussions, and receive timely information and feedback, this fosters ownership, cooperation, and accountability. These factors are essential in managing the shared resources.

The results coincide with established theories. The model of collaborative governance by Ansell and Gash emphasizes that inclusiveness increases pointing out, controlling, and compliance with collective decisions. Moreover, research supports this idea. Environmental management approaches that promote shared understanding and co-creation of solutions have been effective in resolving complex natural resource issues among stakeholders with competing interests (Crawford et al., 2017). In addition, the engagement was inclusive, resulting in a more legitimate, credible, and relevant policy (Mease et al., 2018). There is evidence from Uganda that prioritizing active participation, rather than just information sharing, can considerably increase perceptions of transparency, civic engagement, and satisfaction with governance (Richler, 2020). The main factors for success cited by the studies include effective communication of management objectives, clearly defined stakeholder roles, and continuous stakeholder information on progress (Sri et al., 2020). When these conditions are satisfied, stakeholders become more willing to participate, seeing the value of their contributions.

The close relationship observed in Kenya mirrors experiences in other countries, indicating that inclusive governance directly improves sustainability outcomes. This has important consequences for Kenya. It is very important to strengthen institutions such as Beach Management Units, county governments, and marine conservation organizations to boost cooperation and empower underprivileged groups to participate in the process. Reliable feedback mechanisms and timely information sharing from leaders to communities are equally important in building trust and accountability. Although correlation does not necessarily imply causation, and sustainability also hinges on factors such as enforcement capacity, financial resources, and political will, this strong relationship highlights that stakeholder engagement is a major ingredient of effective governance in Kenya's blue economy.

4.3 Regression Analysis

Table 4 presents the regression results examining the effect of stakeholder engagement on the sustainability of Kenya's blue economy in Mombasa and Lamu Counties.

Table 4: Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.822	.906		4.218	.000
	Stakeholder Engagement	.167	.053	.171	3.168	.002

a. Dependent Variable: Sustainability of Kenya's Blue Economy

The findings indicate that stakeholder engagement has a positive and statistically significant influence on sustainability ($\beta = 0.167$, $p = 0.002$), suggesting that increased stakeholder involvement enhances the sustainability of the blue economy sector.

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that while stakeholder engagement has a significant positive influence on the sustainability of the blue economy in Mombasa and Lamu Counties, its current application remains largely superficial and procedural, limiting its transformative potential. Engagement processes are often tokenistic, with minimal influence granted to participants, resulting in the continued exclusion of key groups such as small-scale fishers, women, youth, and persons with disabilities, despite their direct dependence on marine resources. This lack of meaningful inclusivity undermines trust, weakens compliance with regulatory frameworks, and erodes the legitimacy of governance institutions. Consistent with common-pool resources theory, sustainable management of marine ecosystems requires inclusive, participatory, and locally grounded governance systems that empower stakeholders in decision-making, monitoring, and conflict resolution. Therefore, a shift from symbolic to substantive stakeholder engagement is critical for strengthening collective action, enhancing accountability, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of the blue economy in Kenya's coastal regions.

6. Recommendations

Inclusive Governance: The Ministry of Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs, together with the County Governments of Mombasa and Lamu, should establish and enforce co-management structures that ensure meaningful participation of marginalized groups, supported by Beach Management Units (BMUs) and community organizations.

Institutional Coordination: Agencies such as the Kenya Coast Guard Service, Kenya Fisheries Service, and the National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) should lead efforts to clarify institutional roles, enhance transparency, and implement joint monitoring and enforcement systems in collaboration with NGOs and the private sector.

Empowerment: Non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, and development partners should spearhead training, awareness programs, and the integration of local knowledge with modern technologies, working closely with local communities and government agencies.

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