

Conflicts and Competing Interests in Infrastructure Development: A Case of N2 Toll Road Project, Wild Coast, South Africa

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Abstract: The Wild Coast region in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa, is arguably the least developed area, primarily due to its historical marginalisation caused by Apartheid. To counter this underdevelopment, the current government of South Africa plans to implement a 550 km N2 Toll Road Project to link East London in the Eastern Cape with Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. The government envisions that the project will lead to spatial development through improved accessibility to resources. However, it has been criticised by many, including local communities and environmental advocacy groups, who contend that it will result in socio-ecological disasters and conflicts. Against this backdrop, this study explored the differing views and conflicts among stakeholders affected by the N2 Toll Road Project. A qualitative research approach was adopted, involving in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) with government officials, local communities, business communities, and environmental advocacy groups. The findings indicate that the N2 Toll Road Project has generated significant controversy, with public opinion sharply divided between those who believe the road will have predominantly positive impacts and those who contend that its effects will be overwhelmingly negative. Concerns regarding the disruption of

livelihoods, loss of land, destruction of socio-cultural heritage, and lack of consultation emerged as key sources of conflict among stakeholders. The study recommends the use of inclusive consultation processes and mitigation strategies to minimise conflicting ideologies among stakeholders.

Keywords: Conflict, N2 toll road, wild coast, infrastructure development, competing interests.

1. Introduction

Infrastructure development has been a key priority for the post-Apartheid South African government as part of its efforts to stimulate economic growth and address the socio-economic disparities inherited from the past (Lemanski, 2020). Lemanski (2020) argues that adequate infrastructure facilitates the concept of 'infrastructural citizenship,' where communities either engage with or resist state-led development initiatives, especially when these projects are perceived to negatively impact their livelihoods. Smith (2023) further explores the issue of infrastructure development in South Africa, highlighting the persistent conflicts between various stakeholders involved in such projects. Both Lemanski (2020) and Smith (2023) agree that while infrastructure development is essential for community advancement in South Africa, it often intensifies social tensions and conflicts. Nyamahono (2024) emphasises the issue of territorial disputes, where differing stakeholder dynamics influence how each group views development and perceives its potential benefits. The Wild Coast exemplifies such regions, where the N2 Toll Road Project has sparked debates over the balance between economic development and the protection of local livelihoods and cultural heritage (Mambiravana & Umejesi, 2024; Nyamahono, 2024).

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Situated in what used to be the Transkei Bantustan during the Apartheid era, the Wild Coast has immense potential for the development of the province and the entire country (Steyn, Steyn & Xoko, 2018; Shackleton & Hebinck, 2018). The area remains rich in opportunities, including unspoiled beaches, titanium-rich dunes, and forests with rare plant species (Cheteni & Umejese, 2023; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020; Kepe, 2014). However, this region has historically been neglected, leading to high unemployment, inadequate and poor infrastructure, and slow economic growth owing to the Apartheid regime (Mambiravana & Umejese, 2023).

The Transkei was highly undeveloped and institutionally impoverished by Apartheid's social and economic engineering. Apart from the disproportionately high rate of poverty, the Transkei lacked meaningful socio-economic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, hospitals, and schools (de Wet, 2013; Westaway, 2012). To date, while there are isolated successes in the Wild Coast due to a few investments (Goliath, Mxunyelwa & Timla, 2018), the region falls short of development. To transform this underdevelopment, the South African government embarked on several projects including housing, electrification, and infrastructure development, among others (Reboredo, 2019; Salvia et al., 2019). It is within this developmental discourse that the N2 Toll Road Project in the Wild Coast found its expression in the late 1990s.

Stretching 550 km between East London in the Eastern Cape and Durban in the KwaZulu-Natal Province, this project highlights the need for infrastructure development in this region. However, its potential benefits seem to overshadow the livelihoods and socio-ecological sensitivities of local communities (Mambiravana & Umejese, 2023). Mambiravana and Umejese (2023) argue that different stakeholders hold varying perceptions of infrastructural projects, with local communities feeling that such developments lead to social and environmental problems. Moreover, these projects are perceived to prioritise state-led development with minimal consideration of local communities. However, Sakketa (2023) contends that these projects open up prospects for urbanisation, spatial development, and the exploration of tourism and mining, which have small- to large-scale benefits.

Given these benefits, the Wild Coast becomes a focal point of conflicts over land rights and tenure systems, particularly among the state, local communities, and environmental conservation groups (Xaba, 2023). Xaba (2023) suggests that local communities often bear the brunt of externally imposed development projects, which prioritise external objectives over their socio-cultural values. Local environmental advocacy groups associate such developments with socio-ecological disasters, arguing that they could trigger environmental degradation and social decline (de Villiers & Kepe, 2023). Nyamahono (2024) interprets these tensions as stemming from epistemic differences, with the state and business communities often focused on economic development, while local communities prioritise socio-cultural development. As a result, conflicts may persist due to these epistemic differences, contrasting indigenous perspectives, and conflicting politics of belonging (Nyamahono, 2024). This study is therefore conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the ongoing conflicts among stakeholders, particularly in the context of infrastructure development in the Wild Coast, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

1.2 Problem statement

Although the N2 Toll Road Project is perceived as developmental, it has created divisions within local communities, leading to conflicts among stakeholders, including the state, environmental groups, business communities, and the general populace. For instance, while the state and business communities view the project as a catalyst for socio-economic development, local communities oppose it as an invitation to social disaster (Ntshona and Lahiff 2003; Ntsebeza 2003). Environmental advocacy groups, such as the Wildlife and Environment Society of South Africa (WESSA) and the Botanical Society of South Africa (BSSA), insist that projects of this nature often fail to comply with the requirements of the Environmental Conservation Act 78 of 1999 and the National Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998 (Ngubela, 2023; de Villiers & Keep, 2023). The Environmental

Management Act No. 78 of 1991 provides for the effective protection and controlled use of the environment and matters incidental thereto. The NEMA Act No. 107 of 1998 also provides for the effective protection and controlled use of the environment and matters incidental thereto. These divergent perspectives, coupled with the state's powers to expropriate land, form the basis of conflict in the N2 Toll Road Project. The state, leveraging its absolute power, predominantly presides over all developmental agendas at the expense of other parties (Xaba, 2023; Mambiravana & Umejesi, 2023).

In this light, Nyamahono (2024) argues that such conflicts extend beyond the issue of land rights and are rooted in the contrasting epistemologies among stakeholders. Nyamahono (2024) observed that these conflicts are driven by territorial disputes, shaped by the differing and often conflicting dynamics among stakeholders involved in development projects. These disputes arise from competing claims over territorial belonging, which fuel tensions around developmental affairs. While it is evident that conflicts are prevalent, their nature, impacts, and how stakeholders shape them remain underexplored. This study therefore seeks to deepen the understanding of the complexity of these conflicts within the Wild Coast region. In doing so, the study attempts to understand how different stakeholders intersect or contrast in the broader context of infrastructure development.

1.3 Research question

- How do conflicts and competing interests among government officials, business communities, local communities, and environmental advocacy groups impact the development of the N2 Toll Road Project on the Wild Coast in South Africa?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural theory of risk perception

To understand the nature of conflict and divergent perspectives among stakeholders, this study draws on the Cultural Theory of Risk Perception developed by Mary Douglas in 1966 (Thompson, 2003). The theory explains that various perceptions of the world are largely determined by cultural adherence and social learning (Thompson, 2003). To demonstrate the deeply divided positions of different solidarities on policy issues, Thompson (2003) cited a 19th-century narrative by Reverend Sidney Smith, who observed two women arguing resolutely from opposing positions. "They will never agree," said Reverend Smith when he saw the two women arguing intensely across an Edinburgh street. Opposing premises or worldviews concern human beings and physical nature, and cultural theory maps them in terms of the typology of social solidarity. Thompson (2003) successfully linked these worldviews to a fourfold typology of social solidarity: hierarchists, individualists, egalitarians, and fatalists.

Hierarchists – These stakeholders are devoted to preserving existing systems of control that safeguard their interests. They fear social deviance that threatens the status quo and defer to experts, who are also members of the dominant social order (Thompson, 2003). Hierarchists see nature as self-preserving within rigid and strict limits. Thus, if people do not abide by these limits, nature will no longer have the capability to heal itself, resulting in dramatic and devastating consequences.

Individualists – These stakeholders believe that the environment is favourable to humans and can recover from any exploitation (Thompson, 2003). Individualists are motivated by profit-making and perceive the environment as a commodity from which profits can be reaped through exploitation. As a result, they often overlook ecological rights and the interests of others.

Egalitarians – Egalitarians are characterised by a high level of concern for social injustice, doubts about authority, and a high tolerance for social deviance. They show strong support for participatory democracy and consensus decision-making (Thompson, 2003).

Fatalists – Fatalists are characterised by high levels of disengagement and believe that much of what happens in society is largely beyond their control. They are often marginalised or excluded from public policy discussions. In environmental matters, fatalists view the environment as inherently at risk due to the lack of exclusionary policies in environmental decision-making (Thompson, 2003).

2.2 State-led development and conflicts

Conflicts linked to infrastructure development are complex and often stem from competing interests among stakeholders, land expropriation, land and ecosystem degradation, resettlement, and exclusionary participation, among others (Dorp, 2014; Rabinovich et al., 2020). In terms of conflicting interests among stakeholders, Dorp (2014) explored the intervention of multinational organisations and their effective use of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in infrastructure development. He found that these organisations' profit-driven agendas often lead to conflicts in the areas targeted for investment, primarily due to resistance from local communities. Dorp's (2014) study emphasises adherence to international principles and guidelines for CSR but does not fully consider the implications of these investments on the beneficiary communities, whose social and cultural values frequently clash with the organisations' objectives. Similarly, Rabinovich et al. (2020) identified conflicting views between government officials, businesses, and local communities. The former two view infrastructure development as an opportunity for economic growth, often at the expense of local communities' land rights (Rabinovich et al., 2020). Their study found that state-led infrastructure development directly contrasts with the pastoral nomadism practices of local communities.

Fleck and Hanssen (2024) argue that the state can use eminent domain to forcibly expropriate land for infrastructure purposes and resettle local communities. This term refers to the legal powers granted to governments to take private land for public use (Fleck & Hanssen, 2024). With regard to the legal frameworks in South Africa, the law allows the state to exercise eminent domain to expropriate land for public goods, such as road construction and resource exploitation. According to the Expropriation Act 63 of 1975, land ownership rights can be overlooked by the state, despite the provisions of Section 25(2), which states that "property may be expropriated only in terms of law of general application". This provision, in combination with Sections 25(2)(a) and (b), stipulates that such expropriation should serve public interests, subject to 'just and equitable' compensation for the property owners. Therefore, the eminent domain powers of the government are dictated by legislative frameworks that both influence the nature and pace of infrastructural development over time. Umejesi (2016) contends that this gives the state the authority to expropriate private or communal property to prevent holdouts, effectively diminishing landholders' control over their ownership and resources. This grants the state the power to overcome any resistance from private landowners, facilitating the use of the land for public purposes.

Although eminent domain can lead to spatial development, some scholars and officials have criticised it. De Castro, Hogenboom, and Baud (2016) argued that local communities are concerned about the government's prioritisation of developmental goals over their rights and values. De Castro et al. (2016) also associated state developmental projects with the marginalisation of local communities, as their natural resources are expropriated for initiatives perceived to benefit the greater public. This has been identified as a source of ongoing conflict, as local communities become resistant to these so-called developmental projects for the public interest.

Abuya (2016) argued that as the use of eminent domain increases, grassroots sensitivities, ecological concerns, and local economies are often disregarded. Consequently, the absence of community participation in infrastructure development becomes increasingly apparent. Another challenge has been identified in the perceived inefficiency, corruption, and nepotism of governments, which have fostered a culture of negative disposition among communities. Zhai et al. (2021) explored global literature on corruption and nepotism in state-led infrastructural development. Their study revealed

that government oversight of infrastructure projects often results in costly outcomes, as corruption leads to inflated prices, inefficiency, substandard work, and persistent delays. Furthermore, they noted that the focus tends to be on primary stakeholders – such as service providers – while the values and concerns of host communities are frequently overlooked (Zhai et al., 2021).

In the context of South Africa, Makhatini, Mlambo, and Mpanza (2020) examined the role of the state in infrastructure development and its implications. Their study found mixed responses, characterised by both positive and negative reactions. On one hand, Makhatini et al. (2020) found that the government's infrastructural projects are necessary drivers for development, as they provide opportunities for exposure. On the other hand, they observed that conflicts become imminent, particularly when land is expropriated against the will of local communities. They also found that corruption and inefficiencies characterise most state-led infrastructure projects, as the government often leverages its control over suppliers through the tender process (Makhatini et al., 2020). Makhatini et al. (2020) further noted that implementing parties frequently pay little or no regard to the socio-cultural and environmental values of host communities, leading to complex conflicts.

2.3 The N2 toll road project – a historical sketch

According to the South African National Roads Agency Ltd (SANRAL) Report (2005), the initial Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) for the N2 Toll Road Project resulted in the issuing of an Environmental Record of Decision (RoD) on the 3rd of December 2003, which gave SANRAL permission to begin. However, several appeals were then made, with the then Minister of Environmental Affairs and Tourism objecting to the authorisation granted to SANRAL. On the 9th of December 2004, the Minister set aside the authorisation because the designated ecological experts did not meet the necessity for autonomy as envisaged in the EIA regulations (Government Notice R1183 of 5 September 1997, as amended) proclaimed under the Environment Conservation Act, 1989 (ECA, Act No. 73 of 1989) (SANRAL report, 2005).

Nevertheless, the Minister filed another application for environmental authorisation. Following a proposition call by SANRAL in January 2005, SANRAL delegated CCA Ecological (Pty) Ltd, in association with NMA Effective Social Strategists (formerly Nomi Muthialu and Associates (Pty) Ltd; NMA), as an independent consultant to present another application for environmental authorisation and to embrace the required EIA of the proposed project as per the requirements of the ECA EIA Regulations (SANRAL report, 2005). In March 2007, an environmental scoping report was completed, and it highlighted potential environmental impacts. The project plans have initially started, and the road is projected to be completed by 2030.

The historical overview of the planning and implementation of the N2 Toll Road Project underscores the typical bureaucratic challenges encountered in many state-led development initiatives. As highlighted by Makhatini, Mlambo, and Mpanza (2020) and Zhai et al. (2021), such initiatives often neglect the concerns of host communities, focusing instead on regulatory compliance and the exertion of central authority. This aligns with the identified bureaucratic delays in the N2 Toll Road Project, where the emphasis on meeting regulatory requirements overshadowed the inclusion of the local population in the decision-making process. Umejesi (2016) resonates and argues that the state frequently dictates the decision-making process, even to the extent of overriding existing plans. This top-down approach ultimately disenfranchises various stakeholders, particularly local communities, who feel marginalised and excluded from critical decisions. This is further explained by Xaba (2023), who argued that the outcome of such externally focused projects often leads to resistance from local communities, as they feel undermined and excluded from decision-making. These complex dynamics foster conflicts, with stakeholders divided by their differing levels of power and influence.

3. Materials and Methods

The following section describes the materials and methods used for this study.

3.1 Research approach

This study adopted a qualitative research approach. According to Myers (2019), this approach allows for an understanding of reality through the exploration of people's views and narratives based on their lived experiences. Various techniques were employed to gain a deep understanding of the diverse narratives of stakeholders, their perspectives on the project, and any conflicts that arose. Following Myers (2019), this research approach facilitated a comprehensive understanding of the conflicting interests among the various stakeholders.

3.2 Study area

This research was conducted in the Wild Coast region, which stretches from the Eastern Cape coastal area to Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The focus was placed on the Eastern Cape side, which includes cities such as East London, Mthatha, Port St. Johns, Port Edward, Port Shepstone, and Durban. The Wild Coast is relatively poor due to Apartheid, which deprived this area and its people of basic economic resources, decent development, healthcare provision, jobs, social services, roads, and other amenities (de Wet, 2013; Westaway, 2012). Fast forward to the post-1994 democratic government, plans have been initiated to develop the Wild Coast, including the current N2 Toll Road Project.

This project, along with the unspoiled coastal land featuring wild forests, game parks, nature reserves, and protected areas, gives the Wild Coast the potential to develop the Eastern Cape and South Africa in general (Steyn et al., 2018; Shackleton & Hebinck, 2018). The dominant economic activities in this area include tourism (Mambiravana & Umejesi, 2023), agriculture (Cheteni & Umejesi, 2023), commercial fishing (Kepe, 2014), titanium mining (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020), and other externally induced projects (Xaba, 2023). Still, the Wild Coast remains relatively poor, which prompts the current study to explore the stakeholders' contending views on infrastructure development and their perceptions about it. Additionally, the historical controversy of this region, coupled with the ongoing developmental plans, sparks interest in conducting this study, as stakeholder perceptions on development are arguably intertwined.

3.3 Population and sample

Population – Lusikisiki, which covers an area of 4 km², was selected as the study site. According to data from the Mnquma Local Municipality, Lusikisiki has an estimated population of approximately 4,000 individuals, spread across roughly 500 households, averaging about eight adults per household. Sampling – A combination of probability and non-probability sampling methods was employed to obtain a representative sample. Probability sampling, specifically the cluster sampling technique, was used to create 15 sampling clusters, each consisting of about 33 households, resulting in approximately 264 potential participants. Systematic sampling was then applied within each cluster, selecting every fourth household (n=4), which yielded around eight participants per cluster and formed 15 focus groups. Following this, the non-probability sampling method, particularly convenience sampling, was used to select any available family member to participate in the focus group discussions. It was assumed that these family members would provide generalised views representative of their families and, by extension, their community. Ultimately, the sample size for local communities from Lusikisiki consisted of 120 participants, as outlined in the sampling process below:

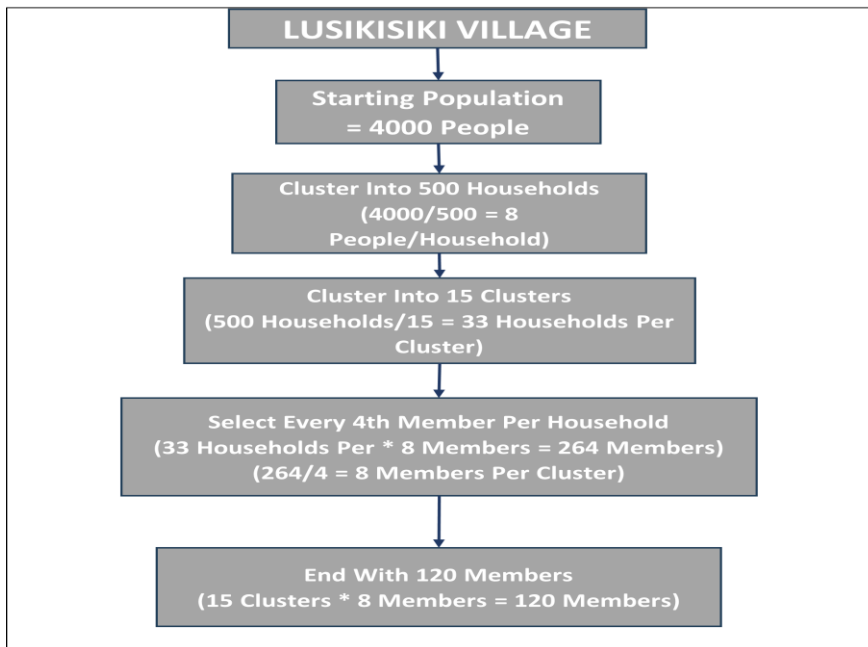


Figure 1: Population and sampling of local community members

In addition, representatives from environmental advocacy groups, the government, and the business sector were selected to provide their institutional perspectives on the conflicts and competing interests related to the project. These included one senior government official and one Local Economic Development (LED) officer from Mnquma Local Municipality, two environmental representatives (one from WESSA and one from BSSA), and three representatives from the business community.

3.4 Data collection tools

Data was collected through key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs). Government officials served as key informants, while representatives from the business community and environmental advocacy groups participated in the in-depth interviews. Community members formed part of the FGDs. The choice of these research instruments aligned with Myers (2019), who highlighted that they allow for the collection of detailed data, facilitating the exploration of complex issues beyond the core focus of the study. The in-depth and key informant interviews, therefore, provided insights into the lived experiences of participants, particularly their views on the differing opinions within local communities regarding the project. Conversely, the FGD participants, who shared a common village of origin, offered narratives about the conflicts rooted in their shared background. All the interviews and FGDs were recorded with the consent of the participants.

3.5 Data analysis and ethical consideration

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The researcher listened to the recordings to gain familiarity with the material. Data transcriptions were then carried out, and themes emerged. Based on the identified themes, categories were developed from the data. This procedure was followed to remain true to the tradition of grounded theory, whereby the data is used to generate new knowledge or evaluate the validity of existing theories in specific social research contexts.

The study adhered to strict ethical considerations to protect the rights of the participants and enhance the credibility of the research process. It was cleared by the University of Fort Hare Research and

Ethics Committee, which provided the ethical clearance UME011SMAM01. The research was also approved by Mnquma Local Municipality, granting permission to conduct the study with government representatives. The ethical clearance certificates served as the foundation for informed consent, informing interested parties about the purpose of the study, data collection methods, and their role in the research. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were strictly maintained, with names and identifying information replaced by codes. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. The study ensured that no harm, whether physical or emotional, would come to the participants. Finally, participants were briefed on the process for receiving feedback on the research findings.

4. Presentation of Results

To understand how competing interests among stakeholders shape the inherent conflicts in the N2 Toll Road Project, four themes were identified, namely:

- N2 Toll Road Project represents development,
- N2 Toll Road Project represents economic asset,
- N2 Toll Road Project lead to mixed feelings and
- N2 Toll Road Project represents socio-ecological disaster

The findings are presented in the sections that follow.

4.1 N2 Toll Road Project represents development

The government officials believed that the N2 Toll Road project would bring much-needed development to the Wild Coast. In their view, the road would provide access to major economic activities such as tourism, mining, and agriculture, thereby increasing the government's revenue needed to meet basic needs. A senior government official supported this by saying:

“There are so many tourist attractions operating in the Wild Coast but visiting such places is actually a big challenge because of poor road infrastructure. Having a major road along the Coast will enable the tourist industry to attract more customers hence contributing to the GDP of the country. Besides, there are also farming and mining activities taking place in the region that are affected by poor road networks” [Government official].

The government official further emphasised the importance of this project by noting its potential impact on developmental metrics such as employment. The official stated:

“In my own view, having such a major road along the Coast is a necessity especially in region like the Wild Coast. The road would bring more investors that will transform the economy of that region. These investors will create employment opportunities for the local people” [Government official].

The LED officer in the municipality supported the view of the above participant saying:

“The road will significantly contribute to the national GDP because the money collected from toll fees will contribute to the revenue of the country. There are many businesses operating in the Wild Coast and this road will create easy access to the market that is East London or Durban” [LED officer].

The LED officer also highlighted the perceived positive impact that the project would have on spatial development programmes through the following assertion:

“The N2 Toll Road Project is part of the government's Wild Coast Spatial Development Initiatives, which were developed to combat poverty, create employment, and uplift the region's

poor communities. Therefore, this road is important for the Wild Coast region which has been neglected for many years in terms of development” [LED officer].

The views expressed indicate that government officials regard the N2 Toll Road project as a significant step towards economic development. The SDI referred to in the quotes is a development strategy outlined in the Eastern Cape Growth Province; its primary objective is to generate sustainable economic growth and development in the Wild Coast region (Goliath et al., 2018). They believe that the road will enhance various economic activities, including agriculture, mining, and tourism, which could, in turn, boost employment and income levels for the broader population. The officials also recognise the Wild Coast’s potential for development in agriculture and mining but note that these efforts are currently hindered by inadequate road infrastructure throughout the region. Additionally, from an LED perspective, the participants highlighted the project’s importance in achieving the objectives of the established SDIs. Overall, government officials were optimistic about the project's positive impact.

4.2 N2 Toll Road Project represents economic asset

The position of the government was supported by the business communities, which pointed to the N2 Toll Road Project as an economic asset. However, they differed from government officials due to their profit orientation. They advocated for the implementation of this project, arguing that it would generate revenue, attract investors, create employment opportunities, and improve the socio-economic status of the region. During the interviews, a business representative said:

“Upon completion, the N2 Toll Road will make the route to from East London to Durban shorter. It is said that the route will be 85km shorter which is almost an hour journey. So, can you say that is not a positive development? As business communities, we value time so that means a lot to us” [Representative from the business community].

Another participant who identified himself as a medical doctor and owns a pharmacy said:

“The construction of the new road would make the region more accessible, thereby increasing employment opportunities and improving livelihoods. It will also help businesses to improve logistics and connections between KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape. In addition, the new N2 road is expected to create jobs for communities, develop infrastructure and promote tourism” [Representative from the business community].

Furthermore, an entrepreneur in Flagstaff supported the above view saying:

“The people should be civilised and learn to adapt to developments that bring new technology, industrialisation and modernisation. All these come with good infrastructure such as roads. Provinces like Gauteng, Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal are industrialised mainly because of good infrastructure that attracts many businesses and companies. This applies to the Wild Coast now as the newly constructed N2 Toll Road is most likely to change the lives of the people in the Wild Coast in many ways. For instance, once there is a good road network, schools, hospitals and recreational centres will be built” [Representative from the business community].

The sentiments expressed above reveal that the business community viewed the N2 Toll Road Project positively, primarily as an economic asset with promising outcomes. They were optimistic that the project's implementation would boost business, increase their income, and attract investors to the Wild Coast. While their views aligned with the government's support for the project, the business community was more focused on profit-making and the benefits of industrialisation and modernisation rather than on providing public goods to those in need. In contrast, the government emphasised the importance of implementing the project efficiently and promptly to improve the livelihoods of local communities. This divergence in focus led to differing perspectives on why local communities should embrace the project, with the government prioritising public welfare and the business community emphasising economic gains.

4.3 N2 Toll Road Project lead to mixed feelings

Two themes emerged from the local communities.

- N2 Toll Road Project represents regression, and
- N2 Toll Road Project has potential development

The findings are presented below.

4.3.1 N2 Toll Road Project represents regression

While the government and business leaders believed that the project would transform the Wild Coast region, many members of the local community criticised these beliefs. They felt that the project may not benefit the local communities but rather serve the interests of a minority group, particularly within the government, where corruption and nepotism are rampant. In other words, they saw little significance of the project in their lives. During a focus group discussion, one of the community members loudly stated:

“We don’t want, we don’t want, I say we don’t want this road. It will affect our families and our next generations to come. Our fields will be carved apart by this road, our livestock will be killed and our ancestral graves will be destroyed or relocated. Personally, I am determined to fight or even die for my land” [FGD participant].

Another FGD discussant interjected, saying:

“The government says the road will bring development in the area, but my question is: Who will be the owner of that development? This road is meant to extract our minerals and destroy everything, including our culture. We don’t want it” [FGD participant].

From the FGDs, it was also observed that most of the participants were in an argument that the road would divide their communities. A female participant noted that:

“We share everything. If someone is crying at your neighbour, you attend. When someone is sick, you attend. You touch one person; you touch the whole community here but this N2 road will divide the community into two and we do not want to be divided” [FGD participant].

In one of the affected communities, a local farmer argued:

“In some places, the road will pass directly on our farms, and the people are being told that they will be compensated if they relocate elsewhere. We are not so sure of how much that compensation is. The government should be clear on that so that we will decide if it is necessary to relocate or not. Otherwise, if the compensation is fair, we can relocate, and I do not have a problem with that” [FGD participant].

Many villagers shared the same sentiment as the participant above, complaining that the road passes through their lands and they have not been consulted. A local farmer in another FGD lamented:

“I was attending a funeral together with my family when SANRAL surveyed through my land and left a metal peg protruding from concrete foundation. What angers me the most is that the survey was conducted without any prior consultation” [FGD participant].

The sentiments expressed above indicate that participants viewed the project as a potential regression that could further deteriorate their already vulnerable livelihoods. Local communities criticised the project for its potential to benefit only a select few while marginalising the majority. They expressed concern that perceived corruption might result in the project being restricted to a small group. Additionally, they voiced significant worries about potential relocations, the destruction of their properties, and the disruption of their sense of place. These concerns were intensified by the lack of consultation and transparency in the processes, which they felt would further marginalise them.

4.3.2 N2 Toll Road Project has potential for development

Few community members, mostly the youth, had mixed thoughts about the road project. One woman shared that she was resettled with her family, and nine of her family graves were removed. She expressed satisfaction with their new arrangement, claiming that her house now has two extra rooms and that SANRAL provided the family with two water tanks. Additionally, she worked at the Mtentu bridge construction site as an office assistant. Although there was monetary compensation, she did not disclose the amount. The participant's perspective appeared to be skewed because of the benefits she received. However, in the same village, another woman narrated that those who questioned the resettlements were told that the land belonged to the chief. She said:

"I had a very big farm. They promised to move my farm here and fence it. It's been four years waiting for them. I was given only R45,000 for my land, and the money was not enough, but I had to accept it because the land belongs to the chief" [FGD participant].

Additionally, some community members, mostly the youths, supported the construction of the N2 Toll Road based on the job prospects, although they had fears that the road would bring some adversities to their indigenous communities. During one FGD, a discussant said:

"The problem is that we have no hope of getting jobs here. The only hope we have is that this road project will result in the creation of thousands of jobs for residents, as SANRAL promised. However, I am very afraid that this place will become a crime zone and prostitution will find its way. Many people want to visit this beautiful place but they are discouraged by poor infrastructure" [FGD participant].

The other discussant supported the above view, saying:

"We really want development in the Wild Coast, this place is backward in terms of infrastructure and the employment rate is very high. However, I am sure this road may facilitate the transportation of drugs and other dangerous weapons like guns and ammunition. A very good example is Gauteng Province, it is one of the richest provinces with very good infrastructure but see how rampant drug dealings and criminal activities are" [FGD participant].

During FGDs, one of the youths who was a political activist said:

"The road is likely to benefit everyone, but I have a problem: it will open access to capitalists, especially these White people; they will come here and start to privatise everything, including our beaches. I have been to Cape Town and there are some beaches that are owned by individuals and one has to pay to enter those beaches and I imagine such a wicked thing happening in our territory" [FGD participant].

From these findings, local stakeholders had mixed feelings, with most indicating that the project has the potential to develop their communities. The youths expressed hope that the project would lead to job creation, while the women benefited financially from the compensation received from relocations; however, some felt that the compensations were inadequate. The participants also raised concerns that, while development is important, the project could give rise to social issues such as crime and substance abuse.

4.4 N2 Toll Road Project represents socio-ecological disaster

Some of the concerns raised by local communities resonated with the views of environmental advocacy groups operating at both local and national levels. One of the impediments that has delayed the construction of the N2 Toll Road since its launch in the early 1990s is the fear of environmental disaster. Representatives from WESSA and BSSA expressed concerns that the N2 Toll Road project would harm the splendid environment of the Wild Coast. They highlighted that the road would pass through the Pondoland Centre of Plant Endemism, which is part of a biodiversity

hotspot – one of only 36 hotspots in the world. Thus, constructing a freeway in such a sensitive area threatens the survival of numerous magnificent species.

Furthermore, the environmental advocacy groups argued that activities such as site clearing and increasing paved areas would lead to deforestation, increased drainage and runoff, soil erosion, sedimentation, and silt loads. The participants' views concurred with the CCA Environmental Report 2007, which indicated that the route would have potential impacts on vegetation, aquatic systems, topography, agriculture, soils, and cultural, archaeological, and palaeontological sites. These environmental advocacy groups based their opposition on constitutional mandates that grant people the right to live in and interact with an environment that is not harmful to them or their well-being in any way (see Section 24 of the Constitution of South Africa). The Constitution also requires that people and stakeholders engage with the environment in a manner that is sustainably protected using legislation and other available measures.

5. Discussion of Findings

From these findings, important conclusions can be drawn regarding stakeholder conflicts in the implementation of the N2 Toll Road Project.

Differing perceptions of development – the study revealed significant differences in how development is perceived among various stakeholders. Government officials viewed the N2 Toll Road Project as an opportunity to provide public goods and services, while the business community saw it primarily as a means for profitability, income generation, and modernisation. In contrast, most local communities perceived the development as a threat to their livelihoods, cultural values, and land tenure systems, although some viewed it as a potential source of employment and improved living conditions. Environmental advocacy groups expressed concerns about the depletion of natural resources, particularly in the Pondoland Centre of Plant Endemism.

These differing perceptions underscore the competing interests and broader conflicts surrounding development and how various stakeholders receive it. Xaba (2023) examined this dynamic and found that externally induced development projects are often met with mixed reactions from local communities. In many cases, these projects are implemented in alignment with state interests and influential external actors, often enforced upon communities without their full consent. Umejesi (2016) argues that this top-down approach, driven by the state's use of eminent domain, prioritises development over the cultural and social values of local communities. Steyn et al. (2018) similarly note that this pattern is becoming increasingly common on the Wild Coast, where traditional values are frequently disregarded in favour of modern development initiatives, regardless of the social and environmental costs. As Xaba (2023) observed, local communities often resort to resistance as one of the few options available to oppose such externally imposed projects. Beyond resistance, Ngumbela (2023) suggests that civil society organisations play a crucial role in bridging these divides and fostering dialogue among stakeholders to reach a shared understanding of development.

Conflicting socio-cultural vs. socio-economic priorities – The findings highlight the conflicting ideas regarding social, cultural, and economic priorities from various perspectives. The youth viewed the N2 Toll Road Project as an opportunity to improve their social and economic circumstances through potential job creation, while the elders associated the development with the erosion of social and cultural values. The business community focused on the economic aspects, in contrast to the views of women who felt disadvantaged by inadequate compensation for the loss of their land. These findings align with Rabinovich et al. (2020), who observed that infrastructure development projects often create clashes and divisions among stakeholders due to their differing agendas, leading to conflicting views and community divisions. This is further supported by Mambiravana and Umejesi (2023), who found that while institutional stakeholders tend to view such projects as drivers of economic development, local communities experience socio-cultural losses.

Nyamahono (2024) explains these conflicts as stemming from differing epistemic standings among stakeholders, where those with less political influence, such as indigenous communities, are often marginalised in decision-making processes, making them perpetual victims.

Community participation and consultation – The study highlighted diverse reactions among stakeholders regarding their perceived roles in the project and the adequacy of their consultation in decision-making. Some community members felt adequately consulted, while others believed they were expected to participate without proper consultation. In contrast, government officials and the business community felt well-informed about the project, whereas environmental advocacy groups perceived a lack of engagement. Consequently, there is ambiguity over who the intended beneficiaries of the project are, as the planning process appeared to be marred by a lack of transparency. This lack of clarity is exacerbated by concerns over corruption, with some stakeholders believing that the project would benefit only a select few rather than the broader community. Zhai et al. (2021) identified this issue as a global problem, where corruption, inefficiency, and the marginalisation of certain stakeholders are increasingly prevalent in state-led infrastructure developments. These problems often stem from inadequate consultation with diverse stakeholders who could serve as gatekeepers to ensure that development projects are implemented ethically and equitably. Umejesi (2016) supports this view, arguing that the state's reliance on its absolute powers to oversee development projects often results in unfairness, leading to conflicts among stakeholders. Similarly, Dorp (2014) found that the interests of governments and business communities are often prioritised, resulting in significant inequalities.

Conceptualising Cultural Theory of Risk Perception – Overall, the findings can be explained by this underpinning theory, which provides an understanding of how stakeholders' sense of belonging impacts their worldviews. Due to the prevalence of different factors influencing belonging among the stakeholders, various typologies exist, shaped by their perceptions of the project (Ali et al., 2021). The government, in its role as the eminent domain, aligns with the hierarchist worldview, focusing on providing the freeway as a public good. The government believes there should be strict adherence to regulatory protocols, structured controls, and effective top-down approaches to manage the project and maintain the socio-economic status quo of the Wild Coast. In contrast, the business communities can be characterised by an individualistic viewpoint, prioritising profit and economic activities. Their agenda is profit-driven, often with little regard for the consequences of their business processes on the host community. Environmental advocacy groups represent the egalitarian worldview, emphasising the preservation of socio-environmental justice and the prevention of ecological degradation. They advocate for inclusive development, unlike the hierarchists and individualists, who focus on their personal agendas. Local communities embody a fatalistic worldview and are rendered powerless and vulnerable in the project. They have minimal power and influence over decision-making and remain marginalised in the absence of inclusive decision-making frameworks.

In the context of this study, Cultural Theory illustrates potential sources of conflict between solidarities, such as the state and construction companies, that either capture rights or neglect the environmental interests of less powerful institutions. Cultural Theory provides insights into how environmental conflicts in South African communities are analysed. It sets the framework for integrating different solidarities instead of imposing an institutional framework biased towards a selected number of actors (solidarities) (Uribe et al., 2018). This is crucial in addressing the 'power and exclusion' that characterise relationships among stakeholders.

In line with this theory, the study illuminated the diverse perceptions of risk and vulnerability among the stakeholders, namely the local communities in the Wild Coast, the State, environmental advocacy groups, and businesspeople (Johnson & Swedlow, 2021). The contradictions in their perceptions arose from their conflicting and varied orientations. According to this theory, neither the policy

arguments nor the worldviews of the four key stakeholders are invalid; their standpoints are vindicated despite some being entrenched in socially constructed values (Imperiale & Vanclay, 2021). Similarly, as their narrative constructions are shaped and defined by their unique historical orientations, none of the stakeholders' discourses are entirely true or right (Ali et al., 2021). The storylines of each stakeholder illustrate why their policy arguments are legitimate, relevant, and credible.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined the conflicts and competing interests among stakeholders involved in the N2 Toll Road Project in the Wild Coast, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The primary objective was to understand how these divergent interests contribute to the complexity of conflicts among the government, the business sector, environmental advocacy groups, and local communities. The findings revealed a mix of perspectives, with some stakeholders viewing the project as beneficial while others saw it as highly detrimental. The government and business sector considered the project essential for development, with the government focusing on the provision of public goods and the business sector emphasising sustainable profitability. In contrast, local communities and environmental advocacy groups viewed the project as the beginning of social, cultural, and environmental degradation. These findings highlight the inherent conflicts and competing interests in infrastructure development projects, particularly when multiple stakeholders are involved. A key takeaway from this study is the importance of understanding the indigeneity and sense of belonging of stakeholders to fully grasp the conflicting perspectives they hold. The following recommendations are therefore provided:

- **Revisit policy and planning frameworks** – The findings reveal discrepancies between the state's plans and the communities' awareness of these plans, indicating a significant lack of transparency. This lack of transparency calls for the need to revisit the prevailing policies and planning frameworks to facilitate inclusive participation.
- **Educate stakeholders about land policies** – The findings suggest that existing policies on land tenure and redistribution are not well understood by local communities. While the government has the authority to expropriate land for the development of public goods, the study revealed that many local communities are unaware of this process. This gap in understanding underscores the need for educational initiatives to help communities better comprehend their roles as citizens and the responsibilities of the state in development projects.
- **Inclusive participatory frameworks** – The study also found the prevalence of exclusionary participation among different stakeholders. It is therefore recommended that spatial development policies consider socio-cultural factors as well as the ethical considerations of the host communities.
- **Further studies** – This study focused solely on exploring the conflicts among various stakeholders without considering the roles of these same stakeholders in mitigating these conflicts. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how different stakeholders, including civil organisations, local communities, the state, the business sector, and other external parties, can contribute to resolving conflicts and managing competing interests in infrastructure projects.

7. Declaration

Authors contributions: Conceptualisation (T.M., J.D.N. & J.B.); Literature review (T.M., J.D.N. & J.B.); methodology (T.M., J.D.N. & J.B.); software (N/A); validation (T.M. & J.D.N.); formal analysis (J.D.N. & J.B.); investigation (T.M., J.D.N. & J.B.); data curation (T.M) drafting and preparation (T.M., J.D.N. & J.B.); review and editing (J.B.); supervision (N/A); project administration (T.M.); funding acquisition (N/A). All authors have read and approved the published version of the article.

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