



# A Framework to Assess Possible Sources of Stakeholder Exploitation: A Developing Country Case

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## Abstract

Solving complex post-disaster reconstruction challenges requires the altruistic involvement of heterogeneous stakeholder groups. However, small, more organized groups, such as government parastatals, private developers, and contractors often exploit large, unorganized groups, such as affected communities, leaving them more vulnerable to future disasters. Based on data collected from a case study in Pakistan, this study proposed a framework to assess, anticipate, and mitigate the exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders in post-disaster reconstruction projects. The framework draws on influential management theories and utilizes reciprocal relationships between stakeholder attributes (power, legitimacy, and urgency), participation, and exploitation. The study also argued for non-binary treatment of stakeholder attributes. The framework will allow practitioners to address issues around the exploitation of stakeholder interests in future post-disaster reconstruction projects.

**Keywords** Collective action · Pakistan · Post-disaster reconstruction · Stakeholder participation · Stakeholder exploitation

## 1 Introduction

Given the rising number of natural hazards and disasters experienced every year, reconstruction of destroyed built, economic, social, and natural environments is perhaps the most perplexing challenge confronting disaster management researchers and professionals (Shafique 2022). Post-disaster reconstruction (PDR) projects are long-term initiatives that aim to restore “normality” and build more resilient communities (Shafique and Gabriel 2022). To achieve these goals, stakeholder participation is becoming increasingly embedded in the planning and implementation of these projects, bringing with it numerous benefits. However, stakeholder participation is complex due to the involvement of exogenous stakeholders and their potentially conflicting interests (Opdyke et al. 2019; Gul and McGee 2022). Theoretically, the affected community is the most significant stakeholder because fulfilling the needs of the affected community and its members remains at the heart of every PDR initiative. In

practical terms, however, affected communities are considered mere beneficiaries with their interests often exploited by other stakeholders (Curato 2018; Anilkumar and Banerji 2021). More than half the PDR projects in developing countries are producing compromised results, especially with respect to the fulfillment of affected communities’ interests (Ika et al. 2012; Sadiqi et al. 2017; Anilkumar and Banerji 2021). An unsuccessful PDR initiative not only wastes resources but also endangers communities’ sustainability and increases their vulnerability to future disasters.

In an ideal PDR context, heterogeneous stakeholders act collectively to achieve the common objective of restoration of the affected community but this seldom happens. Many empirical studies report that the interests of affected communities are exploited by stakeholders with a higher level of influence on the decision-making process—see for example, Jordan et al. (2015), Sadiqi et al. (2017), Herrmann-Luncke and Villagra (2020), and Shafique (2022). The exploitation of vulnerable and less organized groups is a central discourse in collective action theory (Olson 1965; De Bruycker et al. 2019; Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2022). This critical perspective on collective action, presented in Mancur Olson’s (1965) canonical work, theorizes that small, organized groups often exploit the interests of large, unorganized groups. In the PDR context, the affected community is often a large, unorganized group as its capacity to organize and participate is eroded by the

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disaster. Hence, collective action theory framed the current study's exploration of the exploitation of vulnerable and less organized groups' interests.

Drawing on collective action theory, this study sought to answer an overarching research question: how can the exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders be anticipated and mitigated in PDR projects? The study sought to answer this question by analyzing the stakeholder participation phenomenon in the PDR context. The concepts and dynamics of stakeholder participation stem from two mainstream management theories—stakeholder theory and participation theory. Stakeholder theory guides the identification of stakeholders and the prioritization of their interests, while participation theory sets the parameters and processes for the equitable engagement of stakeholders. Collective action theory, acting in tandem with these two theories, sheds light on the phenomenon of the exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders' interests. Therefore, the trifocal lens comprising stakeholder, participation, and collective action theories was used to explore stakeholder participation and exploitation issues in the PDR context. Specifically, the stakeholder salience model (Mitchell et al. 1997), the participation ladder (Davidson et al. 2007), and the exploitation in collective action theory (Olson 1965) guided this study to develop a framework for the assessment, anticipation, and mitigation of vulnerable communities' exploitation in PDR projects.

This research achieved its objectives by studying a PDR project in Pakistan. In its case study approach, project stakeholders were interviewed, and their narrative accounts analyzed with respect to the attributes, participation, and experiences of exploitation of their interests. This study found a strong relationship between stakeholder, participation, and collective action theories. The study proposed that it would be worthwhile to augment the influential stakeholder salience theory to incorporate variance in stakeholder attribute possession. Together, these theoretical contributions are presented as a framework to support PDR practitioners in assessing, anticipating, and mitigating the exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders' interests in future projects.

The following section reviews influential literature on stakeholder salience, participation, and collective action theories to reveal both theoretical opportunities and practical issues that require investigation. Next, the case study approach and the selected site are described, followed by the data analysis and results section. The discussion and implications section describes theoretical and practical contributions. The final section highlights the limitations of the study and proposes future research directions.

## 2 Theoretical Background

This section introduces the study context and the related literature. First, incidents of vulnerable stakeholders' exploitation in PDR projects are discussed. Second, stakeholder, participation, and collective action theories are reviewed to identify common themes and potential gaps.

### 2.1 Exploitation of Vulnerable Stakeholders' Interests in Post-Disaster Reconstruction (PDR) Projects

Disasters triggered by natural hazards, such as those associated with weather and geological events, are headlining media reports more frequently than ever before (Safapour et al. 2021). Since 2001, these disasters have caused more than 1.3 million human deaths, affected about four billion people, and caused damage estimated at USD2.8 trillion (EM-DAT 2021). As the devastating impact and frequency of disasters continue to increase, so do the reconstruction requirements. Developing countries are experiencing heightened vulnerability to severe damage during disasters. Statistics indicate that developing countries of the Asian and African continents are the home countries of more than 90% of the population affected by natural hazard-related disasters from 1980 to 2020 (EM-DAT 2021). Consequently, the reconstruction needs of developing countries are intense and frequent.

Post-disaster reconstruction (PDR) projects face many challenges during implementation, such as stakeholders' conflicting interests and the exploitation of affected communities' interests. Consequently, the results of more than half the PDR projects in developing countries are compromised (Sadiqi et al. 2017). Many recent empirical disaster management studies have reported incidents of exploitation of affected communities' interests by influential stakeholders, resulting in futile PDR projects—see for example, Jordan et al. (2015), Sadiqi et al. (2017), Aase (2020), Herrmann-Lunecke and Villagra (2020), Hülssiep et al. (2021), and Shafique (2022). Given that PDR projects involve many stakeholders, prioritization and management of their often competing interests present huge challenges (Opdyke et al. 2019; Shafique and Gabriel 2022). Hence, identification of stakeholders' influence and management of their potentially incompatible interests need further deliberation to decide whose interests must be given priority. A rich body of stakeholder theory literature provides insight into the dynamics of stakeholder management and interest prioritization.

## 2.2 Stakeholder Identification and Prioritization of Their Interests: Insights from Stakeholder Theory

Individuals and groups with an interest are referred to as “stakeholders” in the management theory and lexicon (Freeman 1984). Stakeholder theory guides managers in their identification of the individuals, groups, and organizations that can influence an organization’s objectives positively and/or negatively and in the prioritization and management of its interests (Wood et al. 2018). Mitchell et al.’s (1997) stakeholder salience model (Fig. 1) is one of the leading theories for stakeholder identification and prioritization (Miles 2017; Khurram et al. 2019).

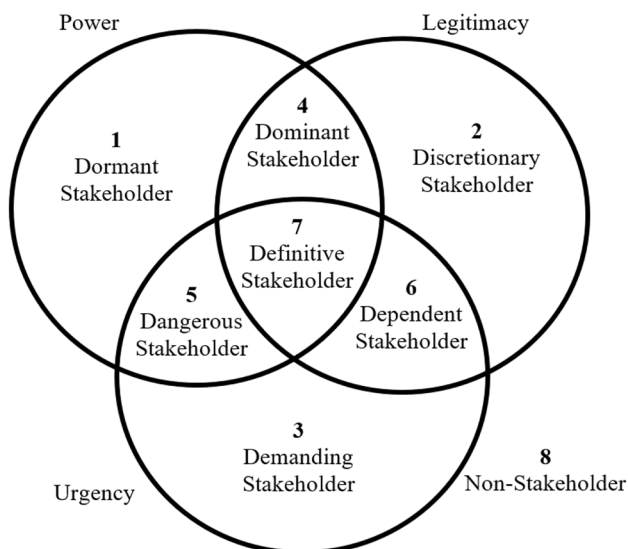
Stakeholder salience theory implies that influential stakeholders can prioritize their interests over the interests of others based on three attributes—power, legitimacy, and urgency. Power is the ability to control resources and people’s behavior and actions. Legitimacy is the perception or assumption that the behavior and actions of any stakeholder are desirable or appropriate within a socially constructed and accepted system of values, beliefs, and definitions. The degree to which a stakeholder’s call for action requires immediate attention is referred to as urgency (Mitchell et al. 1997). While these attributes are perceived to be varied across time, they are either present or absent (Mitchell et al. 1997). To reflect this characteristic of attributes in one word, the dictionary describes the word “binary” as an adjective to represent a situation involving a choice or condition of two alternatives (such as on-off or yes-no) (Merriam-Webster 2023). Contrary to this, “non-binary” is a situation where an incremental increase from one extreme to another extreme

exists. Hence the word “binary” is used in this article to reflect the presence or absence of stakeholder attributes, and “non-binary” is used where various levels of presence to absence of stakeholder attributes are discussed.

Mitchell et al. (1997) also described salience as a measure associated with stakeholders’ significance as perceived by managers. We argued that the salience of stakeholders will be high, moderate, or low if they possess all three attributes, a combination of any two attributes, or only one attribute, respectively. While high-salience stakeholders can influence the decision-making process and other stakeholders to favor their own interests, low-salience stakeholders often have no influence, and their interests are likely to be compromised. Low-salience stakeholders have been described as vulnerable stakeholders for their low capacity to influence decision-making patterns (Civera et al. 2019). Critical studies in the disaster management literature refer to affected communities as high-salience stakeholders due to the unique objective of PDR projects, that is, restoring the lives of affected communities to normal (Williams and Whiteman 2021). With this focus on restoring normality, a PDR project is unsuccessful if the needs and requirements of the affected community are not fulfilled, even though the project meets its cost, quality, and time targets (Davis 2014; Maly 2018). However, stakeholders with a higher degree of control over resources or the decision-making process commonly pursue their interests at the expense of other stakeholders (Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2022). This mis-prioritization of interests leads to compromised results. To avoid this situation, management researchers recommend stakeholder participation in the decision-making process (Maly 2018; Shafique and Warren 2018).

## 2.3 Stakeholder Participation: An Approach to Avoid Potential Issues

The stakeholder participation concept has emerged as a solution to many social, cultural, political, environmental, and developmental issues (Hilbolling et al. 2022; Shafique and Gabriel 2022). Participation means ensuring that people have a direct voice in decision making that affects their lives. Participation in decision making that concerns the individual’s interests allows for the co-creation of ideologies and discourses that constitute shared understanding (Shafique and Warren 2018). However, participation in decision making, if merely rhetoric, fails to achieve the benefits of active and authentic participation (Shafique 2022). A framework known as the “participation ladder,” developed by Arnstein (1969), captures a hierarchy of participation. This model illustrates a continuum of stakeholder involvement by distinguishing different participation levels and relating these levels to the amount of control over the decision-making process (Arnstein 1969; Davidson et al. 2007). Adapting Arnstein’s (1969) eight-rung participation ladder, Davidson



**Fig. 1** Stakeholder attribute and salience model. *Source* Based on Mitchell et al. (1997, p. 874).

et al. (2007) presented a five-rung participation ladder as a way to analyze stakeholder participation in PDR projects (Fig. 2).

On this participation ladder, the “empower” rung is associated with the highest level of control, while the “manipulate” rung is associated with no control (that is, potentially experiencing manipulation). Disaster management researchers have presented ample evidence of the manipulation of affected communities’ interests by empowered stakeholders—see for example, Jordan et al. (2015), Sadiqi et al. (2017), and Herrmann-Lunecke and Villagra (2020). The exploitation of stakeholder interests is also a popular theme for research on collective action theory.

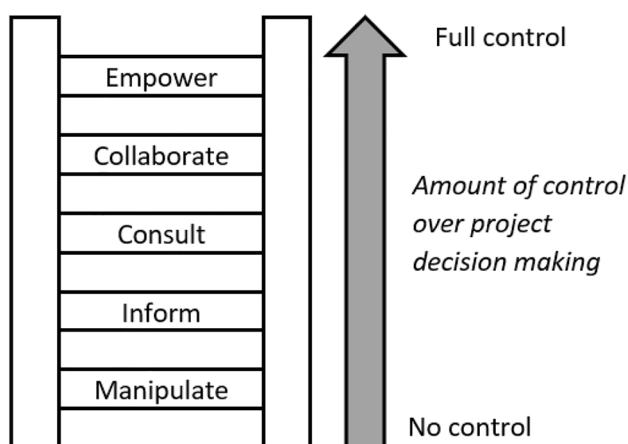
#### 2.4 Collective Action Theory: A Useful Lens for Exploring the Exploitation of Stakeholder Interests

Collective action theory governs the interactions between stakeholders involved in joint value creation (Olson 1965; Bridoux and Stoelhorst 2022). Collective action towards a common interest, such as a PDR project, emerges and operates well when stakeholders demonstrate deep engagement, high responsibility, and willingness to shoulder a fair share of the contribution (Williams and Whiteman 2021). However, problems arise when opportunistic stakeholders exploit the interests of other stakeholders to seek undue advantage for themselves (Schembera and Scherer 2017; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019).

To this end, Olson (1965) in his seminal work argued that a small, organized group tends to exploit the interests of a large, unorganized group (Olson 1965; Brown 2018). The problem of exploitation of interests intensifies in the case of diverse groups’ involvement when smaller groups or individuals seek to maximize their welfare and do not

act to advance the common good of the group even if the group unanimously decides to achieve that common good (Olson 1965; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019). In these situations, collective actions transform into tragedies for the commons, while bringing opportunities for others (Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019). The impact of group size on the contribution to the collective good and on the exploitation of stakeholder interests has been studied and emphasized in numerous studies (Poteete et al. 2010; Brown 2018; Sarasvathy and Ramesh 2019; Rayamajhee and Bohara 2021). The potential for a collective action to become a source for manipulation is of concern, particularly in situations with vulnerable stakeholders.

In general, multiple endogenous and exogenous stakeholder groups of different sizes and diverse interests work collectively in a PDR initiative to assist vulnerable communities in bringing their lives back to normal. In a large-scale PDR project, the affected community is necessarily the largest group of stakeholders; however, due to the recent traumatic impact of the disaster on their lives, they are unorganized. A massive-scale disaster not only causes human losses and damages communities’ habitat and livelihoods but also breaks their cohesion and social structure, leaving community members highly unorganized and dependent on other stakeholders (Shmueli et al. 2021). This situation, hypothetically, has all the ingredients needed for the exploitation of affected communities’ interests by other small, organized groups of stakeholders. Many recent disaster management studies have reported incidents of exploitation of affected communities’ interests resulting in futile PDR projects (Curato 2018; Opdyke et al. 2019; Aase 2020; Herrmann-Lunecke and Villagra 2020; Hülssiep et al. 2021). In developing countries especially, PDR initiatives are just as likely to be unsuccessful as they are to be successful (Jordan et al. 2015; Sadiqi et al. 2017).



**Fig. 2** Ladder of stakeholder participation. *Source* Adapted from Davidson et al. (2007, p. 103).

#### 2.5 Exploitation of Stakeholder Interests: Potential Gaps in the Existing Literature

Although the disaster management literature is replete with incidents of exploitation of vulnerable communities’ interests, existing accounts have not proposed a suitable solution (Jordan et al. 2015; Herrmann-Lunecke and Villagra 2020; Hülssiep et al. 2021). At a time when the incidence and severity of disasters caused by natural hazards are increasing and PDR projects are more common, especially in developing countries, exploitation of affected communities’ interests is a serious challenge. The disaster management studies that have explored challenges in the PDR context have mostly focused on the following aspects: community participation practices and framework (Davidson et al. 2007; Sadiqi et al. 2017); the impact of community participation on project outcome (Shafique and Warren 2018; Opdyke



et al. 2019; Gul and McGee 2022); issues and barriers to community participation (Sadiqi et al. 2017; Safapour et al. 2021); and community participation in risk management, disaster preparedness, and building resilience (Chandra Lal 2019; Ryan et al. 2020; Sufri et al. 2020). Many studies, that have presented evidence of exploitation of community interests, have argued for active community participation as a remedy (Curato 2018; Opdyke et al. 2019; Herrmann-Lunecke and Villagra 2020; Hülssiep et al. 2021). However, some researchers have reported exploitation of communities' interests and failure to achieve PDR objectives despite communities being involved (Opdyke et al. 2019; Rayamajhee and Bohara 2021). This lacuna, therefore, needs further investigation using relevant theoretical concepts to develop a framework for the anticipation and mitigation of the exploitation of vulnerable communities' interests.

### 3 Summary of Literature Review and Formulation of Research Question

This study's literature review revealed that PDR projects are sites prone to the exploitation of large, unorganized, and vulnerable groups by the elite but small, organized, and empowered groups. Of particular concern is the exploitation of affected communities that have already suffered due to the disaster itself. This serious issue poses challenges to the successful achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and PDR objectives. The research question is therefore: "How can the exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders in PDR projects be assessed, anticipated, and mitigated?" The next section provides a summary of the methods adopted to answer this research question.

## 4 Method

This study followed a case study approach, used qualitative data collected through structured interviews, and employed the open coding method for thematic analysis to explore a comprehensive answer to the research question.

### 4.1 Case Study Approach

This study applied a qualitative research method to explore a PDR project in Pakistan. Face-to-face semistructured interviews ( $n = 46$ ) conducted in 2017 were the major source of primary data. Diverse perspectives were elicited through interviewing highly knowledgeable informants with diverse backgrounds and perspectives (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). The purposive sampling technique was used to recruit stakeholders with specific roles (for example, contractors and government officials). Each stakeholder group was

considered a unique cluster of perspectives due to their specific interests and involvement in the project. The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit respondents from the affected community group. A total of 46 respondents from all stakeholder groups—affected community ( $n = 34$ ), government officials ( $n = 3$ ), contractors ( $n = 1$ ), political leaders ( $n = 2$ ), community leaders ( $n = 2$ ), social workers ( $n = 3$ ), and a journalist and social activist ( $n = 1$ )—were interviewed. How many qualitative interviews are enough? To provide an answer to this question Baker et al. (2012) concluded that it depends on the methodological approach. Rich, appropriate, and well-saturated data produce reliable and trustworthy results (Elo et al. 2014). While the study followed a case study approach and incorporated diverse perspectives, 46 qualitative enquiries were considered appropriate to explore a situation from three standpoints, that is, stakeholder participation, salience, and exploitation. The research involved human participation, hence ethical approval from the University of Queensland was obtained before data collection. Informed consent by the research participants was also obtained before starting each interview.

Each respondent was asked a set of open-ended questions to allow in-depth exploration of the research question. After the introductory briefing, the interviews focused on the identification of the project stakeholders; their roles and interests; the pattern of their participation in the project activities, particularly in the decision-making process; and the experience of exploitation (or of no exploitation) of their potential interests in the project. All the interviews were conducted in the local language. One of the researchers is native to Pakistan and could understand and speak the local language. In total, the 46 interviews took more than 30 hours, an average of about 40 minutes per interview. The interview transcripts were subsequently translated from the local language into English.

A qualitative data analysis software package (NVivo 11) was used to support the open coding and thematic analysis of the primary data. The open coding and thematic analysis followed the procedure for theory building, as outlined by Boyatzis (1998), Boje (2001), and Braun and Clarke (2006). A theme is described as something that reflects a patterned response or meaning relevant to the key research concepts (Braun and Clarke 2006). In the current study, these key concepts comprised stakeholder attributes, interests, and participation level; intended project outcome; and achievement or exploitation of stakeholder interests. The open coding method was used to derive the initial list of concepts discussed in the data. The authors read the interview transcripts independently to prepare the list of codes in Nvivo. Subsequently, multiple nodes that pointed towards similar ideas were grouped as a theme. The guiding concepts were grounded in relevant theoretical frameworks. For instance, stakeholder(s) were perceived in possession of a power

attribute if they made project-related decisions in any one or more of the project processes; managed or controlled project resources; or influenced other stakeholders to perform a specific role. Similarly, stakeholder(s) were perceived in possession of a legitimacy attribute if they had a defined and accepted role in the project, or their claims and actions were accepted by other stakeholders. Likewise, stakeholder(s) were perceived in possession of the urgency attribute if they required the immediate attention of other stakeholders and were interested in the earliest completion of the project (Mitchell et al. 1997). Davidson et al.'s (2007) concepts of manipulate, inform, consult, collaborate, and empower were used to identify the participation level of each stakeholder. Also, Olson's (1965) concepts of group organization (organized or unorganized), group size (small or large), and exploitation of interests guided the identification of potential exploitation of stakeholders. Interview data are not part of the data analysis section considering the word limit, but can be shared with interested researchers on request.

## 4.2 Case Study Description

The New Balakot City Development (NBCD) project was initiated in the aftermath of the October 2005 earthquake that was one of the most devastating natural hazard-related disasters in the history of Pakistan (Khan 2007). The magnitude of the earthquake on the Richter scale was 7.6, affected about 30,000 km<sup>2</sup> area, resulted in 86,000 human deaths, 80,000 injured, and about 3.5 million homeless. Balakot City was one of the worst-affected cities in the region as the epicenter of the earthquake was only 30 km away from the city (Quzai 2010). After the rescue and recovery phase, the government of Pakistan established the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) to achieve long-term PDR goals (Khan 2007). The NBCD project, initiated by ERRA which had sole responsibility for its implementation, was implemented to provide permanent housing facilities to about 5000 earthquake-affected families.

The project was located approximately 20 km from the existing Balakot City and was initiated in 2007 with a target completion time of three years, that is, by July 2010 (Sadaqat 2012). However, the project was delayed for reasons discussed by the interviewees and was still in progress at the time of the data collection. This situation provided a unique opportunity to collect the lived experiences and observations of stakeholders who had observed various stages of project implementation. Moreover, as the project was typical of collective action involving several stakeholder groups of varied interests, sizes, and participation levels, it was suited to the exploration of stakeholders' salience, patterns of participation, and the potential exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders' interests.

## 5 Data Analysis and Results

The government of Pakistan conceptualized and planned the NBCD project. The government was the exclusive decision maker in the project conceptualization, selection of the project site, control of the project funds, and in the call for international aid to implement the project. Subsequent support provided by donors and other stakeholders reflected the government's possession of power, legitimacy, and urgency. The nongovernment interviewees' accounts corroborated this view that the government of Pakistan had a very high degree of salience. The government's participation level also aligned with the "empower" level on the participation ladder as it independently made decisions throughout the project. While a comparatively small group, the government's well-defined hierarchy of roles enabled it to operate as a highly organized stakeholder. No respondent suggested that the government was exploited; however, landowners reported experiencing exploitation from the government.

As another powerful stakeholder, the Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority (ERRA) was actively involved in the project. The control of ERRA over project funds and resources reflects its possession of power and legitimacy. Some interviewees highlighted that ERRA did not prioritize timely project completion; its focus appeared to be on attracting funding from the government and donors but it lacked the incentive to deliver the project efficiently. The issue of ERRA's vested interests is discussed later in this section when examining the exploitation of the affected community. Full control and direct involvement of ERRA in project activities aligned its participation at the "empower" level on the participation ladder. No indications of the exploitation of ERRA by other stakeholders were mentioned. As a small group of stakeholders, ERRA was well organized with a well-defined hierarchy of roles and supporting organizational systems.

The government of Pakistan asked for international aid to support the reconstruction, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and other countries pledged funds for reconstruction works. Several interviewees shared their view that donors had legitimacy and urgency attributes; however, no references were made to donors possessing the power attribute, reflected by their lack of involvement in decision making and lack of control over project resources. Donor engagement in the project was well aligned with the "collaborate" level on the participation ladder. As with the government of Pakistan and ERRA, donor representatives were a small yet well-organized group. While no interviewees reported that donors were exploitative, no evidence was found that this group was exploited by other stakeholders.

Interviewees indicated that the provincial government possessed legitimacy and urgency attributes. However, it

did not possess the power attribute as it was not involved in project-related decision making and did not control project resources. A provincial government official explained that their role in the process was to attempt to convince landowners to sell their land. This aligned with supporting responsibilities and, therefore, with the “collaborate” level on the participation ladder. As may be expected with a government organization, despite their relatively small size compared to other groups, the provincial government can be considered an organized stakeholder. No respondent shared evidence of the provincial government’s exploitation or involvement in the exploitation of other stakeholders.

Local contractors were hired by ERRA for the construction of houses and other related facilities such as roads, footpaths, playgrounds, and schools. Contractors were not involved in any decision making (they were issued directives by ERRA) and, therefore, they lacked the power attribute. However, contractors had a significant responsibility for construction and their role was accepted by all stakeholders, they possessed the legitimacy attribute. The contractors had an interest in the earliest possible completion of the project as they carried financial risk if delays occurred, benefitting from prompt invoicing for completed work. Therefore, they were also perceived to have the urgency attribute. Due to the nature of their business and involvement in the project, the contractors were at the “collaborate” level on the participation ladder and were a small yet organized group. No accounts were given of the contractors being exploited; however, through substandard construction, the community was adversely impacted by their self-interest.

Local community leaders and politicians acted as community representatives and spokespeople at various forums. While local politicians are formally selected representatives, community leaders are informally chosen, yet equally influential, in the community. Both types of these spokespeople resided in the affected area of Balakot City; however, unlike their constituents, they were affluent and not living in temporary shelters. The government and other salient stakeholders consulted with them to collect household data and disseminate information to community members. Many interviewees discussed the spokespeople’s intermediary role, which reflects possession of the legitimacy and urgency attributes. Their intermediary role also aligned with the “consult” level on the participation ladder. These spokespeople were a small group but better organized than the affected community group. Specifically, the politicians had designated roles as community representatives that provided them with a hierarchical position in the local governance system. Interviewees did not report any manipulation of local spokespeople’s interests. However, local politicians were reportedly involved in the manipulation of the interests of the affected community.

Ownership of property made the local landowners stakeholders during project planning and implementation. However, they did not possess the urgency attribute as they were not part of the affected community. They also lacked the power attribute due to their absence of control over project resources or decision making. The government did not consult landowners before making decisions regarding their properties—they were simply informed of the decision with an unjust amount of compensation paid. They had limited information on project site selections and were “informed” that decisions had been made (in terms of their participation). Several interviewees reported they were very dissatisfied with the decision relating to their properties; they felt they were exploited by the government. These local landowners were a small and unorganized group.

The affected community members had no formal role in the project; no interviews indicated that community members had a function to fulfill. The only attribute that the affected community possessed was urgency and their salience was considered low. These arguably vulnerable stakeholders had no control over decision making and consultation was only through the spokespeople who were found to be unreliable in representing their interests. Some interviewees commented that the affected communities were deliberately excluded from the project. The participation level of the affected community aligned with the “manipulate” level on the participation ladder as many respondents from this group reported exploitation of their interests. Many affected community members mentioned how the government, ERRA, and contractors prioritized their own interests over the community’s needs. For example, incidents reported by the community indicated that contractors engaged in substandard construction to maximize their profits. Another interviewee commented that local politicians unnecessarily delayed the project to avoid relocation of their voters, which would adversely affect their potential for re-election. Project delivery was also delayed by ERRA due to the luxurious conditions its members enjoyed as part of the project implementation team. The affected community, a large but unorganized group, experienced significant exploitation at the hands of those groups with greater salience and higher levels of organization. An undeniable evidence of their exploitation is that the community is still living in the temporary shelters and the project has not been completed even after a lapse of more than 10 years. Table 1 presents a summarized view of the results of the data analysis amalgamating the fundamental concepts of stakeholder salience, participation, and collective action theories.

## 6 Discussion and Implications

The data analysis found a reciprocal relationship between stakeholder salience, participation, and exploitation. The results presented in Table 1 reflect that exploitative behavior

**Table 1** Attributes and participation level of stakeholders in a post-disaster reconstruction (PDR) project in Pakistan

Stakeholder Group	Stakeholder Salience Theory				Participation Theory	Collective Action Theory (Olsonian Theory)			
	Power	Legitimacy	Urgency	Salience	Participation Level	Group Size	Group Organization	Evidence of Exploitation	Exploited by
Government of Pakistan	√	√	√	High	Empower	Small	Organized	No	N/A
ERRA	√	√	√	High	Empower	Small	Organized	No	N/A
Donors	–	√	√	Moderate	Collaborate	Small	Organized	No	N/A
Provincial government	–	√	√	Moderate	Collaborate	Small	Organized	No	N/A
Contractors	–	√	√	Moderate	Collaborate	Small	Organized	No	N/A
Community leaders	–	√	√	Moderate	Consult	Small	Organized	No	N/A
Local politicians	–	√	√	Moderate	Consult	Small	Organized	No	N/A
Local landowners	–	√	–	Low	Inform/Manipulate	Small	Unorganized	Yes	Government of Pakistan
Affected community	–	–	√	Low	Manipulate	Large	Unorganized	Yes	ERRA, local politicians and contractors

√ possession of the attribute, *ERRA* earthquake reconstruction and rehabilitation authority.

was engaged in by those with moderate to high levels of salience; conversely, low-salience stakeholders were exploited. The analysis also revealed that the salience attributes were not binary—stakeholders had varied degrees of the power, legitimacy, and urgency attributes. These findings are discussed in more detail in the following.

### 6.1 Relationship between Stakeholders' Salience, Participation, and Exploitation of Their Interests

The findings presented in Table 1 reveal a reciprocal relationship between stakeholders' salience and participation, and their exploitative behavior or experience of exploitation. First, what can clearly be seen is the positive relationship between stakeholders' salience and their participation. High-salience stakeholders have a higher level of participation, while low-salience stakeholders have a lower level of participation. The government of Pakistan and ERRA are high-salience stakeholders in the project, with their participation also at the highest level, that is, "empower" on the participation ladder. The affected community is a low-salience stakeholder, which also corresponds with their participation level on the participation ladder, that is, "manipulate."

Furthermore, the relationship between stakeholder salience and participation is bi-directional; any change, whether an increase or decrease in participation, has a similar impact on salience and vice versa. This relationship was observed in the detailed analysis of stakeholders' participation at various

stages of the project. For instance, the contractors who did not participate in the project's initiation and planning stages did not possess any attributes and had low salience at that stage. However, in the implementation stage, they participated at the "collaborate" level and achieved a moderate level of salience by possessing the legitimacy and urgency attributes. Similarly, a corresponding change in the salience and participation level of the government of Pakistan and ERRA was observed at various stages of project execution. The government of Pakistan was the sole decision maker at the project conceptualization stage and had the highest level of salience and participation. As it was not engaged at the project conceptualization stage, ERRA had a low level of salience and participation at that stage. However, at the implementation stage, ERRA's salience and participation level were comparatively higher than those of the government owing to the decision making and leading roles that ERRA performed at this stage.

Table 1 also reflects the finding that stakeholders' experience of enacting or being subjugated to exploitation was also connected with their salience and participation level. The data imply that stakeholder groups that experienced exploitation were unorganized and comparatively large, with a low level of salience and participation. Conversely, stakeholder groups that acted in an exploitative manner were small, organized, and had a higher level of salience and participation. The data indicate that the interests of the affected community and the local landowners (unorganized, large groups of stakeholders with low salience and participation



level) were exploited by the government of Pakistan, ERRA, local politicians, and contractors (small, organized groups with relatively high salience and participation level). Hence, a reciprocal relationship was found between stakeholder salience, participation, and exploitation of their interests. Low salience and participation made stakeholders vulnerable to exploitation, while high salience and participation helped stakeholders exploit other stakeholders' interests. Figure 3 shows the relationship of stakeholder salience, participation, and collective action theory.

Figure 3 reflects that the stakeholders' salience and participation level are positively correlated with each other and their ability to exploit the interests of others. However, risk of interests being exploited is inversely correlated with their salience and participation.

### 6.2 Inappropriate Characterization of Stakeholder Attributes

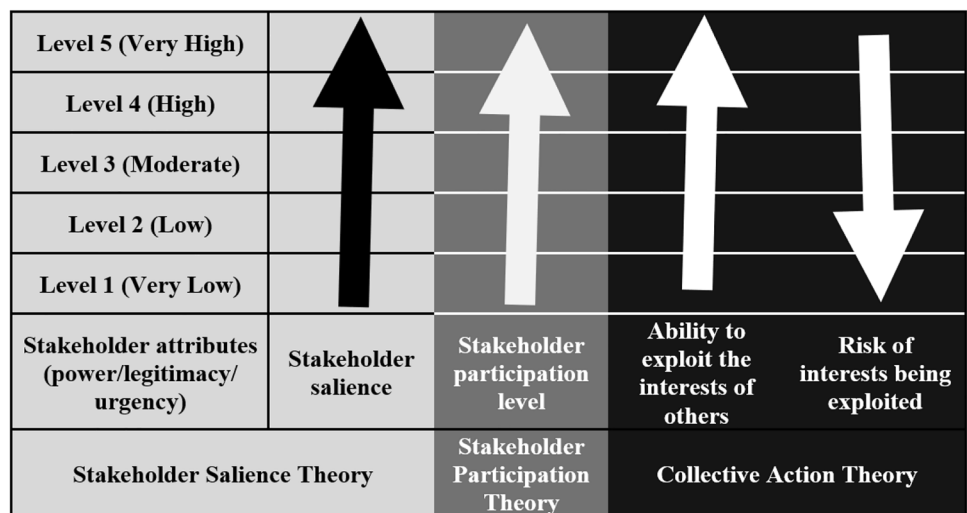
As discussed in the theoretical background, attribute characterization in the stakeholder salience model is binary—they are either present or absent (Mitchell et al. 1997). However, the data analysis highlighted the binary treatment of stakeholder attributes as a major limitation of the existing stakeholder salience model. The data revealed that multiple stakeholders possessing the same attribute influenced the decision-making process differently. Theoretically, a stakeholder is perceived as having the power attribute if they can influence other stakeholders to do something that they would not otherwise have done (Mitchell et al. 1997). However, in practice, the power attribute of a stakeholder who can influence only one other stakeholder is not the same as a stakeholder who can influence all stakeholders or more than one stakeholder within the same context, setting, and process. In this scenario, while both stakeholders fulfill the criterion for

possession of the power attribute, their influence on decision making can be significantly different.

For instance, according to the theoretical binary view of attribute possession, the government of Pakistan and ERRA both possess the power attribute (see Table 1). In practice, the government of Pakistan is more powerful than ERRA because it can influence many stakeholders including ERRA itself. However, ERRA can only influence a few other stakeholders. Similarly, community leaders and local politicians were perceived to have the legitimacy attribute (see Table 1); however, the degree of their legitimacy was far less than that of ERRA or the government of Pakistan. This variance in attribute possession is obvious for the urgency attribute. The level of urgency attribute possessed by the affected community was not comparable to that of any other stakeholder because their survival was at risk. The inappropriate perception of attribute possession depicted the false salience of stakeholders, as stakeholder salience is determined by the number of attributes they possess. Benefitting from the reciprocal relationship between stakeholders' participation, salience, and exploitation of their interests, the new framework presented in Table 2 conceptualizes the non-binary characterization of stakeholder attributes and determines the variance in stakeholders' attribute possession.

Table 2 conceptualizes five possible levels of each attribute, aligned with the five levels in the Davidson et al. (2007) participation ladder. Non-binary conceptualization of attributes also offers slightly different levels of stakeholder salience and guides the evaluation of risk of being exploited and/or exploiting other stakeholders' interests. To validate the suitability of the new framework, Table 3 presents a summarized view of the variation in attribute levels possessed by case study stakeholders and highlights a consequential change in their salience. For each stakeholder group, a particular level of attribute ranging from 5 (very high) to 1 (very low) was identified. The explanation

**Fig. 3** Linkage between stakeholder salience, participation, and collective action theory



**Table 2** New framework to determine the variance in stakeholder possession of attributes

Stakeholder Attribute Level	1 = Very Low	2 = Low	3 = Moderate	4 = High	5 = Very High
<b>Power</b>	Stakeholder does not have any control over resources. They do not possess decision-making power. They do not have influence on other stakeholders.	Stakeholder does not have control over resources. They have knowledge of decision-making process but do not have any influence on decisions or other stakeholders.	Stakeholder does not have control over resources. They are not the decision makers, but other stakeholders consult them before making decision. However, their opinion may or may not be considered. They can influence some stakeholders.	Stakeholder possesses shared power or control over resources but needs support from other stakeholders. Their opinion is likely to be respected and they can influence multiple stakeholders.	Stakeholder possesses power, control over resources and makes decisions independently. They can enforce decisions on all other stakeholders.
<b>Legitimacy</b>	Stakeholder claims, role, or actions are not accepted by other stakeholders.	Stakeholder claims, role, or actions are accepted by some stakeholders but not prioritized or given preference over others.	Stakeholder claims, role, or actions are accepted by all stakeholders, but not prioritized or given preference over others.	Stakeholder claims, role, or actions are accepted by all stakeholders and are given priority and preference over some stakeholders.	Stakeholder claims, role, or actions are fully accepted and prioritized over all other stakeholders. No action can be taken against their opinion.
<b>Urgency</b>	Stakeholder demands are neither immediate nor critical.	Stakeholder demands are immediate but not critical.	Stakeholder demands are immediate and critical, but their survival is not threatened.	Stakeholder has urgent and critical demands. Their survival is threatened but may not need an immediate action.	Stakeholder demands are immediate and critical. Their survival fully depends on immediate action of other stakeholders.
<b>Saliency</b>	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
<b>Participation level</b>	Manipulate	Inform	Consult	Collaborate	Empower
<b>Risk of being exploited</b>	Very High	High	Moderate	Low	Very Low
<b>Risk of exploiting other stakeholders</b>	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High

**Table 3** Non-binary analysis of stakeholder attributes in a post-disaster reconstruction (PDR) project in Pakistan

Stakeholder Group	Power	Legitimacy	Urgency	Saliency	Saliency Level Binary (Table 1)	Saliency Level Non-Binary
Government of Pakistan	5	5	5	15	<b>High</b>	<b>Very High</b>
Earthquake Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Authority	4	5	2	11	High	High
Donors	2	2	2	6	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Low</b>
Provincial government	2	3	3	8	Moderate	Moderate
Contractors	1	3	3	7	Moderate	Moderate
Community leaders	2	3	5	10	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>High</b>
Local politicians	2	3	4	9	Moderate	Moderate
Local landowners	1	3	1	5	Low	Low
Affected community	1	1	5	7	<b>Low</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

Attribute level: 1 = Very low, 5 = Very high; Saliency levels: Very Low 3, Low 4–6, Moderate 7–9, High 10–12, Very High 14–15. Bold indicates difference in classification based on non-binary treatment of saliency attributes.

provided in Table 2 was used as the criterion to identify the specific level of each stakeholder. For instance, ERRA has the power, but their power level is one level lower than the government, because they cannot influence all stakeholders. Similarly, the affected community's urgency is at the highest level given that their survival is at risk and needs the immediate attention of all stakeholders. The final two columns in Table 3 highlight the impact of the variation in attribute possession on stakeholders' saliency.

### 6.3 Practical Contribution: Predicting and Mitigating Exploitation

Offering new avenues of research, this study proposed a framework for supporting PDR practitioners in assessing, anticipating, and mitigating the harmful effects of the exploitation of vulnerable stakeholders. It is proposed that a PDR practitioner could use this tool during the initiation stage of a PDR project and periodically thereafter to appraise saliency against the three attributes in a non-binary manner. It could also be used to identify how the PDR project systems and structures are invoking participation levels that would be likely to result in higher or lower levels of saliency and, therefore, changes in the potential to exploit or be exploited. For example, this tool increases the visibility of whether an affected community is simply being informed or whether they are consulted regarding any decisions, thus indicating if they are at a high to moderate risk of exploitation. To mitigate this situation, the community needs systems and structures in place so it can achieve and exercise power, urgency, and legitimacy at moderate to high levels.

## 7 Conclusion

Post-disaster reconstruction (PDR) projects are increasingly prevalent across the globe. Unfortunately, these initiatives are also commonly found to be opportunities for the exploitation of vulnerable communities that are already suffering due to the disaster. Acknowledging that these contributions require further validation, this study advances both theory and practice by proposing a reciprocal relationship between stakeholder attributes (which, as argued in this study, should be seen as non-binary), stakeholder participation, and the likelihood of the exploitation of their interests. The case study data informed the framework that reveals these relationships and that can be used by practitioners to discuss, anticipate, and mitigate exploitation in PDR projects. Identification of these relationships also bridges theories across the contiguous domains of stakeholder and disaster management.

There is a possibility for further investigation into the relationship between the type of stakeholder participation and the organizational structure. For instance, when a stakeholder group actively participates in the decision-making process, this aligns with more developed organizational structures, which may help reduce the risk of exploitation. However, when a stakeholder group is merely consulted or informed, the formal organizational structure may be of lesser significance, potentially leading to a higher risk of exploitation for that stakeholder group. These hypotheses warrant further examination in future research and should be taken into account by PDR researchers and practitioners.

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