

AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES

Governance · Accountability · Civic Trust

# The *Social License* to Operate

*Community, trust, and stakeholder  
engagement in African universities*

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**The social license to operate**

Community, trust, and stakeholder engagement in African universities

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## **Dedication**

*To communities and institutions learning how to build trust, not just systems.*

# **Preface**

This book began as an academic study on stakeholder engagement practices and approval ratings among host communities of selected tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria.

While the research started within a narrow academic frame, the findings pointed to a broader reality. Institutions do not succeed on legal authority alone. They depend on trust, acceptance, and sustained relationships with the people they affect.

This book translates those findings into a wider conversation about universities and public institutions across Africa. It focuses on how communication, engagement, and responsiveness shape legitimacy and long-term institutional success.

The aim is simple. To help leaders and practitioners think more clearly about how institutions relate with people.

# **The social license to operate**

## **Community, trust, and stakeholder engagement in African universities**

Universities are often seen as centres of knowledge, innovation, and development. Yet many institutions learn that legal authority and government approval do not guarantee public support.

Across Africa, universities operate within communities whose trust, acceptance, and cooperation affect how well they function. When relationships with host communities are strong, institutions gain goodwill and public support. When those relationships weaken, conflict grows, reputations suffer, and development projects slow down.

This book explores why stakeholder engagement has become a central responsibility for modern institutions. It draws on evidence from tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria, and wider lessons from African higher education settings. It shows how communication, trust, participation, and relationships shape public approval and institutional legitimacy.

The book treats stakeholder engagement as part of leadership and strategy. It affects whether institutions are simply allowed to operate or whether they are accepted by the people around them.

It is written for university leaders, communication professionals, policymakers, development practitioners, students, and researchers.

Institutions may be approved by governments, but they are accepted by people.

# Introduction

## Beyond legal authority

A university can have a government charter, regulatory approval, qualified staff, modern facilities, and a clear mandate. Even with all of this, it may still struggle to gain the support of people living around it.

This shows a simple reality. Legal authority does not automatically create public acceptance.

Across Africa, institutions are realizing that success depends on more than compliance with rules. It also depends on how they relate with the communities affected by their work. Communities want inclusion. They want respect. They want to be heard.

This form of acceptance is often called a social license to operate.

A social license is not issued by a government office or regulator. It comes from people. It shows up in trust, cooperation, and willingness to work with an institution. Unlike official licenses, it is not permanent. It must be maintained through consistent engagement and responsible actions.

The idea is often used in sectors like mining and oil and gas, but it applies just as much to universities and public institutions. Universities shape local economies, influence social life, and affect surrounding communities.

This book is based on a study of stakeholder engagement practices and approval ratings in selected tertiary institutions in Rivers State, Nigeria. While the research focuses on universities, the lessons apply more broadly to public institutions.

The findings show a clear pattern. Institutions that communicate consistently, respond to concerns, and involve stakeholders tend to receive stronger support from host communities. Where decisions are imposed or communication flows in one direction, dissatisfaction increases. When benefits are not shared fairly, trust declines.

Community approval is shaped by relationships.

Stakeholder engagement should be seen as an ongoing process of building trust and shared understanding, not an occasional activity.

This book explains how institutions earn trust, why community approval matters, and what can be learned from the Rivers State experience. It also shows how institutions can build stronger and more stable relationships over time.

The main idea is simple.

Institutions may be approved by law, but they are sustained by trust.

## **What readers will gain from this book**

Readers will learn:

- Why stakeholder engagement is essential for institutional success
- How trust affects public approval and legitimacy
- Why communication fails even when many channels exist
- What host communities expect from universities and public institutions
- How conflict develops and how it can be reduced through engagement
- Why responsiveness matters in building trust
- Practical ways to strengthen relationships with stakeholders
- A framework for improving engagement practice

The central question the book addresses is simple:

Why do some institutions gain trust and support while others struggle, even when they have authority and resources?

The answer lies in how they relate with the people affected by their decisions.

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