

# EFFECTIVENESS OF COMMUNICATION PLAN IN SMALL TO MEDIUM ENTERPRISES' PROJECTS SUPPORTED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Abstract

The South African Government, through the Department of Transport (DoT), offers financial support to various engineering companies to use in their road construction projects to improve the country's road infrastructure. However, many road projects allocated to Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) are not completed on schedule. Communication plan was used as a lens to track essential elements involved in ensuring project success. A probability stratified random sampling method was used to select 34 respondents from the DOT who completed questionnaires as part of this quantitative study. Employees of the DoT's Finance department in KwaZulu-Natal province were chosen because they were well placed to highlight the communication plan followed and challenges experienced in handling financial contracts and monitoring of such between themselves and the SMEs. On the one hand, the respondents generally claimed to have sound measures to monitor the progress of funded projects and apply appropriate techniques to cope with awarded contracts. On the other hand, they conceded that poor planning and poor communication management were the main challenges facing the department. The study calls for regular, open communication to enhance the success of projects which should be monitored in every phase following clear performance indicators. If problems are identified, a communication strategy to resolve them should be established; this strategy should be evaluated against its objectives.

**Keywords:** communication plan, small medium enterprises, financial assistance, management, construction projects

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world recognise the importance of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in the social and economic development of their countries. This recognition is evident in the number of

government funded programs designed to capacitate and financially boost entrepreneurs' projects (Dushime, Muathe & Kavindah, 2022). Similarly, the South African government supports SMEs through its various departments. For instance, the Department of Transport (DoT) is mandated by the 1996 Constitution to execute duties at three levels of governance which are local, provincial and national government levels. The DoT is responsible for maintaining airports, roads, traffic management and public transport. In carrying out these responsibilities, the department is informed by sector research which influences legislation, policy and monitoring of its implementation to set the strategic direction of subsectors, assigning responsibilities to public entities and other levels of government, regulating through setting norms and standards, and monitoring implementation (DoT, 2022).

At provincial level, the DoT (2016) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) province, stipulates its mission as to ensure an integrated safe and accessible transport system. Construction and maintenance of a road network that meets the mobility needs of the provincial citizens are core functions of the DoT which supports national and provincial growth and development strategies. The DoT (2016) also states that it is responsible for regulation and provision of an integrated transport system through regulating public transport whilst ensuring access to safe, efficient and affordable public transportation and facilitating the development of the freight transport industry. The department is also committed to life-long quality of the transport system in KZN. This commitment is, therefore, expected to translate to sound monitoring of projects to ensure their completion. The monitoring would entail clear lines of communication among all stakeholders.

To realise these goals, the South African government relies on the South African National Roads Agency Limited (SANRAL) working in collaboration with local government to execute planned projects. In turn, the local government's DoT provides funding to SMEs for the construction of certain structures at local and provincial level. The number of stakeholders involved shows the extent to which an effective communication plan is essential to coordinate activities and ensure harmony. The estimated National Expenditure for 2019 – 2020 for roads alone was R33 billion which is about 1.8 billion US dollars (DoT, 2022). The South African government's high investment on roads can be understood against the context in which, as a developing nation, transport infrastructure is critical to economic and social development (Salunkhe & Patil, 2014). Lack of funding has previously been identified as a challenge leading to the failure of many SMEs and therefore requires special attention not only in its allocation but ensuring the delivery of expected services and goods (Ngcobo & Sukdeo, 2015). Writer (2019) notes that the Stellenbosch University research and the World Bank concur that the South African freight and logistics industry contribute about 11.8% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The biggest slice of this GDP contribution is from land transport because of its diverse nature and affordability. This confirms the significant role of the efficient road infrastructure on the economy that has also been witnessed in many other countries (Banerjee et al., 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2022; Moschovou & Tyrinopoulos, 2018; Tarigan et

al., 2021). Socially, communities and the poor need roads to commute between places of residence and employment and anywhere else (SANRAL Strategic plan, 2016). The quality of roads becomes even more pressing at a time South Africa is struggling economically. Naidoo (2019) cites the Reserve Bank's Quarterly Bulletin which raises alarm at the shrinking state of the economy which has not been seen in a decade. The South African economy is reported to have contracted by 3.2% which indicates that the country is at risk of recession. Linked to the shrinking economy, Statistics South Africa (Statssa, 2022) observed a 3% decline in business turnover with construction being hard hit at -8,5%. To further complicate matters, PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC, 2023) forecasts a gloomy future due to the country's electricity load-shedding which causes severe economic pain to small businesses. These economic challenges make studies on road construction projects in South Africa significant because construction is vulnerable to environmental issues that could be economical, social and political (Alamgir et al., 2017; Lee & Kim, 2021; Purnus & Bodea, 2015). Effective and efficient communication plans within an organisation can be useful in sharing information among stakeholders when the unexpected occurs that would affect construction projects (Nyanga, 2022).

Hence, the article sought to investigate the effectiveness of the communication plan applied by the DoT Finance department's employees in KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa to assist SMEs to complete road construction projects. Effective communication is in this context understood as sharing accurate information with all members who need the communication content (Hall, 2002). In this instance, communication is viewed as sharing of information between government officials and SMEs. The approach and focus of the article mark a shift from research that tends to focus on SMEs or contractors as responsible for project failures. Stakeholders who have received less attention in previous studies are government departments and their communication plans that are designed to assist SMEs to meet their mandate (Govender, 2017). The research question is: How effective is the communication plan of the Department of Transport in executing funding and monitoring processes of road construction projects awarded to SMEs?

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Burke (2006) asserts that central to project planning is the communication plan that is inclusive of all key stakeholders such as departments, companies, suppliers and contractors. There should be a clear communication plan regarding who (lines of communication), what (scope of communication), how (meeting, email, presentation), when (schedule), feedback (confirm message received and that it was understood) and filing (storage and retrieval) of a project. The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) Guide (2013) emphasises that effective communication is critical in connecting various

stakeholders from different organisations and backgrounds which may bring out conflicting interests and perspectives on a project. An effective communication plan may assist in constructively managing conflict over ideas, methods and techniques by making conflict productive (Durotimi, Dare & Ayuba, 2022: 86). It is therefore critical that project managers should have an effective communication plan which would assist them in communicating competing interests among stakeholders (Nah et al., 2001). Darmaningrat et al., (2019) argue that each project requires its communication plan that is in accordance with its activities and stakeholder needs due to varying levels of projects complexity. As such, the communication plan should indicate clear lines of communication, roles and responsibilities of each stakeholder and communication escalation procedures (Darmaningrat et al., 2019). Kerzner (2013) and Project Management Institute (PMI, 2013) note that 90% of a project manager's time is spent exercising various communication activities such as providing project direction, decision-making, attending meetings and engaging in various forms of record keeping and reporting. For this reason, communication is one of the key project manager's competencies that they equally require to manage financial risks of a project (Purnus & Bodea 2015: 461).

Rossmann (2019) asserts that a communication plan of an organisation hinges on its values, mission and vision statements. As such, all the South African government's departments are expected to subscribe to the Batho Pele Principles (BPP) policy document which guides them in providing quality public services to the citizens (Department of Public Service and Administration, 1997). Zondo (2022) describes BPP as the initiative introduced by the South Africa's first black president administration, Mr Nelson Mandela, to encourage the prioritisation of others to improve service delivery. These principles are often found posted in strategic places of government buildings to serve as a reminder to public servants that they should conduct their duties in an effective manner (Ngcobo & Mvuyana, 2022). In essence the BPP were designed to transform communication between civil servants and the public to be effective and efficient (Joel, 2022; Moodley, 2012). However, studies by Ncampalala and Doorgapersad (2022) and Okumbe and Verster (2008) found that there is no harmony between policy principles and practice due to lack of professionalism among some of the South African government employees who disregard rules and regulations. It is of concern that despite huge investments and the significance of roads, road construction projects awarded to SMEs rarely live up to expectations. Communication has been identified as a critical management tool to support developmental opportunities provided to SMEs (Nyagah, 2017; Pizar & Mazo, 2020). The failure of construction projects could therefore be due to miscommunication between DoT officials and entrepreneurs awarded these huge road projects (Greco et al., 2022).

Chan et al., (2004: 188) describe the construction industry as a very competitive high-risk business clouded by numerous challenges, such as little cooperation, lack of trust and ineffective communication

resulting in adversarial relationships between contracting parties. Delays in completion of construction projects have been witnessed across the globe due to different and similar causes and effects (Oshungade & Kruger, 2017; Salunkhe & Patil, 2014). Yet, there are causes of delays that have been found to be uniquely South African. These causes include strikes, suspension of work by the client, mistakes and discrepancies in design documents, delay in approving changes in the scope of works and unacceptable quality of materials (Oshungade and Kruger 2017: 24). Furthermore, Prinsloo (2016: 152) places construction delays in South Africa into three categories: contractor delay, client delay and external factors where neither the client nor the contractor can be blamed. In this case, government departments could be classified as a client. Majed et al., (2016) note that government departments are also affected by disruption of public development plans, the financial execution plans, and community annoyance. In the South African context, community dissatisfaction often manifests itself through service delivery protests that can be very violent resulting in deaths and destruction of property.

Part of the risk is due to that the construction sector is vulnerable to economic changes, especially during recession periods, which leads to delays, penalties and loss of work opportunities (Purnus & Bodea, 2015). Added to this, Cunningham (2017: 21) attributes the continued failure in the construction industry as due to it being a highly complex and fragmented process requiring many stakeholders to complete the project. Cunningham (2017) asserts that competing objectives among these stakeholders often lead to poor project management. Government departments and parastatals are also stakeholders as they are expected to implement infrastructure projects within set timeframes and budget allocation (Govender, 2017). It is at times like these that a lack of an effective communication plan can contribute to a project failure (Aziz, 2021; Bilir & Yafez, 2021; Darmaningrat et al., 2019). Murithi et al., (2017) also argue that since schedule delays are common features in all construction projects, the presence of an effective communication plan and the implementation of actions that prevent disruptions are fundamental. There should therefore be a clear open communication plan for use between the client and the consultant to promote efficiency and effectiveness of the relationship and projects undertaken (Adu & Opawole, 2020; Ahiaga-Dagbui et al., 2020; Al Nahyan et al., 2019). It is for these reasons that this paper seeks to ascertain the extent to which government departments adhere to an effective communication plan to ensure finalization of road construction projects.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Ghazinoory and Aghaei (2023) recommend the onion metaphor as a popular research methodology process among researchers when investigating complex issues and theories. Similarly, the research process of this study can be encapsulated from the perspective of Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill (2012)

who use the onion metaphor to view the research process as consisting of several layers that need to be clarified by the researcher.

Hence, the first layer for this article is positivism which is its research philosophy. This is, secondly, followed by the adoption of the deductive process as a research approach since the theory to be tested is the role of effective communication in producing successful projects. Thirdly, the case study is the research strategy since the DoT's finance staff are our subject and the population under investigation. In this case, the target population are the employees of the DoT's Finance department in KZN as they are better positioned to provide their perspectives of the financial contracts they have with SMEs and their communication plan. A sample of 34 respondents were obtained from this large population. Numerical data were then utilised to measure the communication plan variable to determine if it could reveal certain trends that could be generalised about the population and the organisation (Polit & Beck-Tatano, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Fourthly, the research method is mono in that one method of data collection, that is, quantitative, is used. Linked to the research method is, fifthly, the short period of data collection that occurred once. Lastly, the research strategy is a survey in which a questionnaire was utilised to collect data from the DoT respondents (Saunders et al., 2012). The research used structured questions in which each statement contained a set of answers from which respondents could easily and quickly select their preferred responses. These sets of answers were in the form of a five points Likert scale where the respondents indicated their level of agreement or disagreement. A pre-test of the questionnaire was conducted with five respondents. Questionnaires were hand delivered to respondents by one of the employees in another section of the finance section and collected on an agreed upon date. However, as a self-report mechanism, we were conscious that respondents may give less truthful answers to protect themselves and their organization. This risk was minimized by guaranteeing anonymity of respondents by also not requiring them to indicate their names.

Collected quantitative data were subjected to a systematic analysis which involved measuring or counting attributes (quantities) to find evidence to support or contradict the stated ideas. Data were captured using MS Excel and later exported to Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) version 20 for statistical analyses.

#### **4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The first question inquired whether the respondents viewed the funding and monitoring of SMEs' engineering projects by the DoT as efficient or not. Figure 1 below displays the results in which the majority strongly agreed (52%) and agreed (36%) with this statement. The overall level of support for this view was an amazing 88% of respondents which suggests that the employees believed they were

doing their job efficiently. Those that strongly disagreed were a mere 12% and none took a neutral position. This is a clear indication that most of the respondents support the assertion that the DoT efficiently funds and monitors SMEs to conduct the construction of allocated projects. The results contradict the earlier findings made by Ncampalala and Doorgapersad (2022) and Okumbe and Verster (2008) who concurred that there was no harmony between policy principles and practice due to lack of professionalism among some of the South African government employees who disregard rules and regulations. These respondents appear to believe that they are doing enough in executing their duties as efficiently as possible.

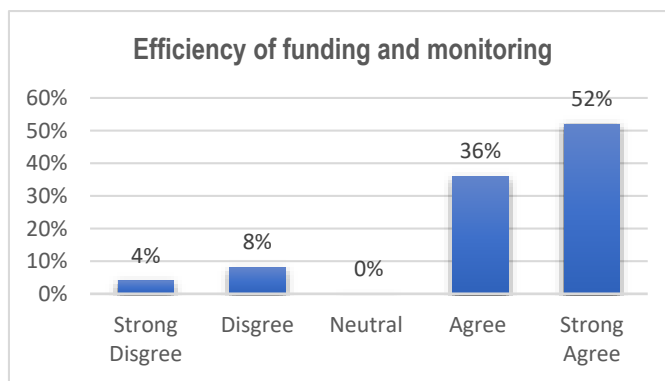


FIGURE 1. EFFICIENCY OF FUNDING AND MONITORING OF CONSTRUCTION PROJECTS

Source: Generated by Excel

The second question sought to understand whether the department of transport makes it easy for SMEs to access funding through their communication of clear guidelines. The results that emerged showed a resounding agreement among the sample of respondents (see Figure 2).

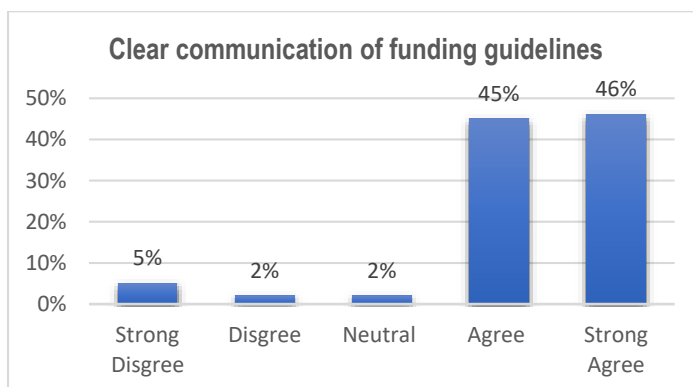


FIGURE 2. CLEAR COMMUNICATION OF FUNDING GUIDELINES

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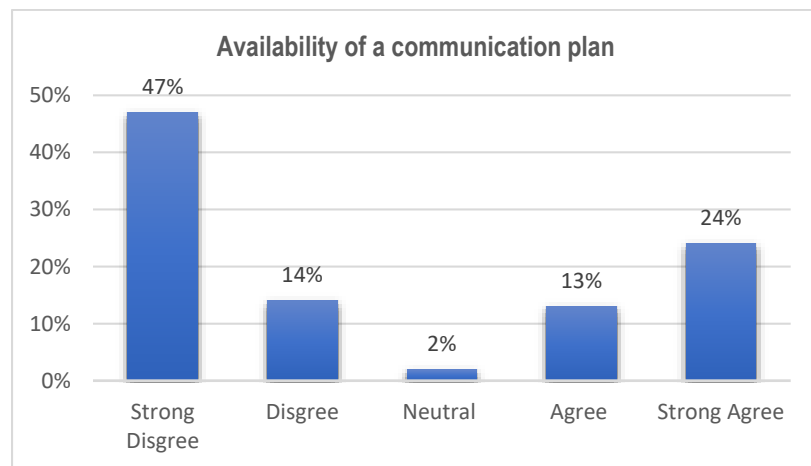


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As many as 91% of respondents concurred that their organisation had clear funding guidelines that they communicated to the SMEs. This was evident in that 46% strongly agreed and 45% agreed. The level of disagreement was very low considering that a mere 5% strongly disagreed and were supported by 2% of respondents who disagreed. The remaining 2% took a neutral stance on the matter to suggest that they were uncertain about the level of clarity of communicated funding guidelines.

The extent to which the respondents were in agreement on the communication of clear funding guidelines is to be applauded. This positive response suggests a high awareness of communication as a critical management tool to support SMEs access funding and other developmental opportunities by these DoT employees (Pisar & Mazo, 2020).

The third question inquired on the availability of a communication plan the respondents followed in their interactions with SMEs. The results were unexpected in relation to the responses received in previous questions where the respondents indicated that the DoT was efficient and had clear communication guidelines on the available funding opportunities. However, the results on this question portray a contradictory view to these previous results (see Figure 3).



**FIGURE 3. AVAILABILITY OF A COMMUNICATION PLAN**

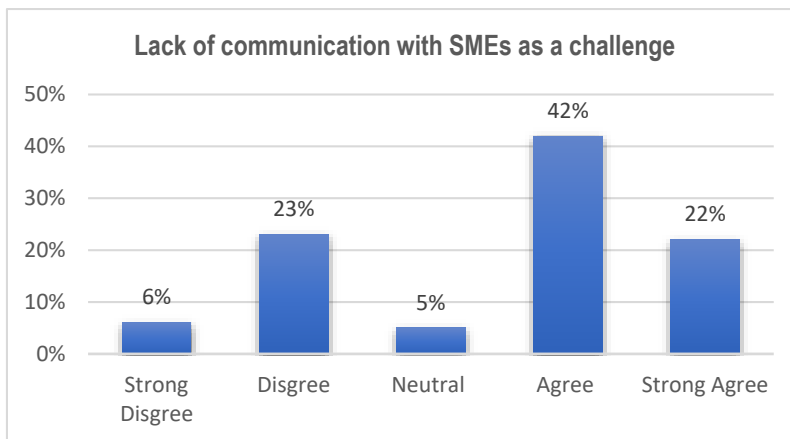
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The respondents were unexpectedly negative about the availability of a communication plan. This was evident in that 47% strongly disagreed and they were supported by 14% who disagreed. This suggests a 61% negative view on the availability of a communication plan within the DoT. The rest of the respondents either strongly agreed (24%) or agreed (13%) that the DoT had a communication plan they followed in their interactions with SMEs. Only 2% were neutral.



The overall impression is that not enough of the respondents (37%) attest to the availability of a communication plan within the organisation. This would be very concerning considering the importance of the communication plan in project planning and execution, as emphasised by Burke (2006) and PMBOK (2013). Moreover, a communication plan could be very useful in dealing with conflicting views among stakeholders as it indicates the escalation procedures (Darmaningrat et al., 2019). This finding can be taken as the reason why most projects either take long or are left incomplete because of disagreements among various stakeholders (Oshungade & Kruger, 2017; Salunkhe & Patil, 2014).

The fourth question served as a follow up on the previous one in that it stated that poor communication was part of the challenges faced by the DoT in dealing with SMEs. Figure 4 displays a high indication by the respondents that poor communication was an issue with SMEs.



**FIGURE 4. LACK OF COMMUNICATION WITH SMES AS A CHALLENGE**

Source: Generated by Excel

Responses displayed in figure 4 reveal that 42% of the respondents agreed and 22% strongly agreed to the statement that poor communication is part of challenges they encounter with contracted SMEs. This is a concerning high figure (66%) given the importance of communication among stakeholders in the execution of projects. Only 28% were negative in that 23% disagreed and 5% strongly disagreed to the assertion. The remaining 6% were neutral.

The results give the impression that the absence of a communication plan has an impact on the poor communication challenges experienced by DoT with SMEs. Another important attribute of a successful consultant/client relationship is communication which is unfortunately lacking in this instance (Majed et al., 2016; Prinsloo, 2016).

The fifth question stated that the DoT had an effective communication plan which enabled it to be involved throughout the cycle of a project. The results are displayed in figure 5.

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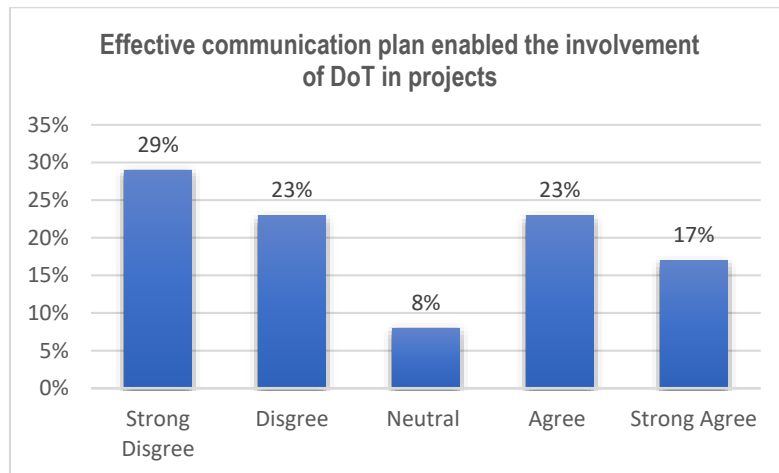


FIGURE 5. EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION PLAN ENABLED THE INVOLVEMENT OF DOT IN PROJECTS

Source: Generated by Excel

The results show some division among the respondents. There was no huge difference between those that supported either the positive or the negative statement. The respondents that were negative were at 52% whilst those that were positive were at 40%. As few as 8% took a neutral position. This again implies that improvement in efficiency and effectiveness of operations by the DoT would be a preferable option for SMEs. There is also a lack of full commitment to the Batho Pele Principles (BPP) policy document which guides government departments in providing effective quality public services to the citizens and prioritising their needs (Department of Public Service and Administration, 1997; Ngcobo & Mvuyana, 2022; Zondo, 2022). The results are further congruent with earlier studies that found that there was a discrepancy between policy and practice in government departments due to unprofessionalism among employees (Ncampalala & Doorgapersad, 2022; Okumbe & Verster, 2008).

The remaining questions, in a form of statements, wanted to ascertain the level of agreement and disagreement among the respondents on other challenges that could possible interfere with their departments' communication plan. The first among these identified political interference as one of the hindrances. The respondents' responses are displayed in Figure 6.

The results show that the majority (62%) of the respondents were positive on the statement. This was in that 34% strongly agreed and 28% agreed with the statement. The respondents that were negative amounted to 34%, in which 11% strongly disagreed and 23% disagreed. The remaining 4% were chose to be neutral on this statement.

The results are in line with the observation made by Cunningham (2017) regarding the construction industry as being highly complicated due to many stakeholders' involvement. Since politicians have a stake on the completion of projects they can interfere with processes and communication plans of the

responsible departments (Govender, 2017). It is for this reason important that departments should have effective communication plans that would assist them to deliver successful construction projects as early as possible (Darmaningrat et al., 2019).

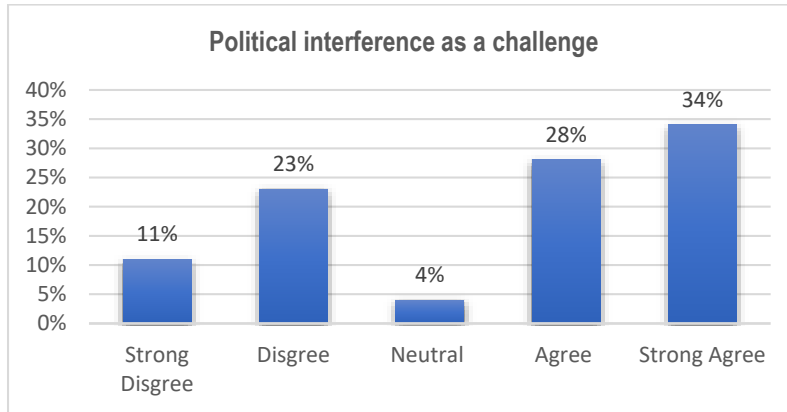


FIGURE 6. POLITICAL INTERFERENCE AS A CHALLENGE

Source: Generated by Excel

The next statement on challenges indicated that budgetary constraints can interfere with the implementation of an effective communication plan that would ensure timeous delivery of construction projects. The responses are outlined in Figure 7.

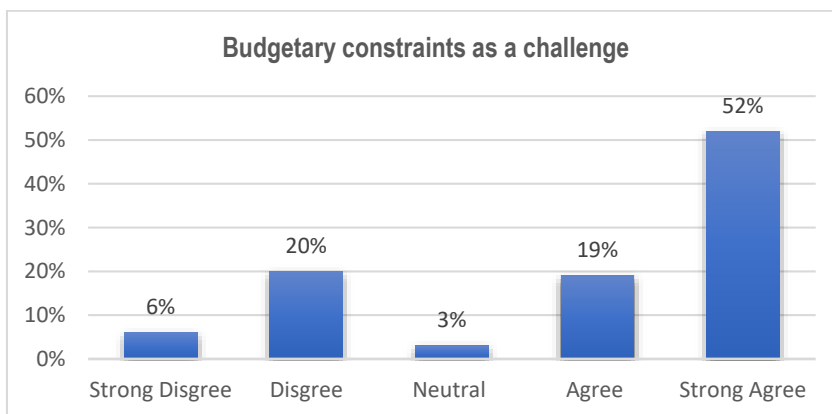


FIGURE 7. BUDGETARY CONSTRAINTS AS A CHALLENGE

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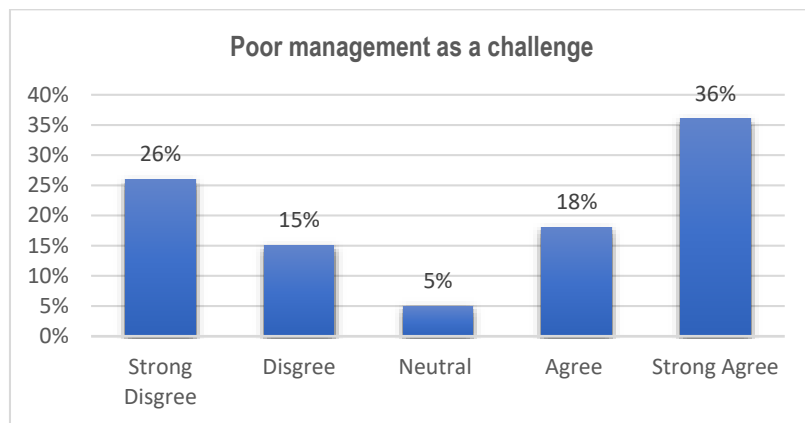
Figure 7 shows that most respondents (71%) were positive towards the statement. In this instance, 52% strongly agreed and 19% agreed with the statement. The negative responses were at 26% because of 20% respondents that disagreed and 6% that strongly disagreed that budgetary constraints were a

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challenge on them executing an effective communication plan that would promote speedy delivery of projects.

The results are in congruent with studies by Govender (2017) that identified budgetary constraints as a challenge to the delivery of construction projects because of the high costs involved. Moreover, the complex nature of construction projects makes them to be vulnerable to environmental issues in a country, such as the economy, politics and social issues (Alamgir et al., 2017; Lee & Kim, 2021; Purnus & Bodea, 2015; PwC, 2023).

The last statement was directed on the role of management as a challenge on the implementation of an effective communication plan. The results are indicated in Figure 8.



**FIGURE 8. POOR MANAGEMENT AS A CHALLENGE**

Source: Generated by Excel

Figure 8 displays some level of division among the respondents on this last statement. On the one hand, 54% of respondents were positive about the role of poor management in their department as a challenge to their implementation of an effective communication plan in ensuring successful construction projects. This group was made up of 36% that strongly agreed and 18% that agreed. On the other hand, 41% were negative on the statement, whereby 26% strongly disagreed and 15% disagreed that poor management was responsible for the ineffective communication plan. The results suggest that more of the respondents were of the view that poor management is a concern to them executing the departments' communication plan which would ensure a good relationship between SMEs and the DoT (Adu & Opaowole, 2020; Ahiaga-Dagbui et al., 2020; Al Nahyan et al., 2019). Indeed, communication has been identified as a critical management tool to support developmental opportunities provided to SMEs that requires support from the management of the DoT for the employees to be successful in their engagement with consultants (Pisar & Mazo, 2020).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The outcomes of the study clearly indicate that the respondents view an effective communication plan as critical to the execution of their duties when interacting with consultants awarded major construction projects. This would include communication with various stakeholders, such as the government and communities. The complex nature of the construction industry was viewed as requiring an effective communication plan. There were however internal challenges that contributed to the poor implementation of the available communication plan. Amongst these, were budgetary constraints and poor management. It is therefore imperative that these challenges be addressed so as to facilitate the timeous completion of major construction projects and the growth of SMEs. Future studies could evaluate the monitoring and evaluation by the government departments as a measure to support SMEs in completing major construction projects.

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