

# Roles of project steering committees in large agricultural projects in Cameroon

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This study investigated the effective functioning of an agricultural project steering committee, which is considered the driver of a large-scale project given critical roles entrusted to them.

**Method:** A survey of 90 project owners who benefited from two large agricultural projects and members of steering committees was conducted, including semi-structured interviews with five experienced steering committee members. The collected data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences version 25, comparing the response of project owners and steering committee members in relation to the function of the steering committee.

**Results:** The result revealed that steering committee members' top three functions were validation of project results, custodian of project governance and review of project performance. These functions differ from the suggestion from the literature that steering committee members' top three functions are to identify project priorities, identify and manage potential risks, and provide steering on budget, schedule, and quality.

**Implication:** The work provides expert views on the steering committee in large scale agricultural projects as it clearly shows a misconstruction of their most essential functions, which may be attributed to limited formal communication between the steering committee and project owners and less clarity in their sphere of influence concerning the implementation of large-scale agricultural project. Therefore, roles and responsibilities in relation to functions of the steering committee should be defined at the onset of the project, with a clear indication of their sphere of influence to improve project management and guarantee success.

**Keywords:** Project, Management, Governance, Advisory Committee

## 1. Introduction

Agriculture is the mainstay of Cameroon's economy, engaging an estimated 70 percent of the economically active population and accounting for an estimated 80 percent of the primary sector's contribution to the country's gross domestic product (Abia et al., 2016). More recently, the agricultural sector provides a third of foreign exchange earnings and 15 percent of the country's budgetary resources (Blizkovsky & Emelin, 2020). Despite this great potential, agriculture in Cameroon faces many challenges, demanding optimal investment in large-scale projects whose success or failure can either drive economic development or hinder it (Hamann & Sneyd, 2021; Fonjong & Gyapong, 2021). Recently, large-scale project failure rates have resulted in unnecessary waste of resources, estimated to exceed 80% of their planned budget and schedule by 20 months past the planned date of implementation (Bertram et al., 2019; Mcmanus, 2016). In Cameroon, large-scale agricultural projects are hardly on schedule and resources are provided late (Hamann & Sneyd, 2021; Folefack et al., 2020), resulting in a limited final impact on economic development and benefit to actors in the sector. This is very true for projects like the (1) Agricultural Value Chain Development Project (PADFA), which realised US\$ 26.29 million and targeted rice and onion subsectors for 5 years with about 20 months delayed, yet, production volumes are still limited, and rice import volumes are even higher (IFAD, 2018) and (2) Agricultural Investment and Market Development Project (PIDMA), that implemented at the tune of US\$ 166.60 million) and targeted cassava, maize and sorghum subsectors for 5 years with a

24-month delay and was rated by the World Bank as moderately satisfactory (World Bank, 2022). Folefack et al. (2020) found maize production by project beneficiaries low. Apart from the low level of the project, it had been observed that large-scale agricultural projects experienced delays and unnecessary extra costs on beneficiaries, investors and donors, directly affecting the agricultural project success of the organisations involved while consumers still continue to suffer the increasing costs of food and shortages (Marks & Ellis, 2013; Higginbottom et al., 2020; Folefack et al. 2020). This limited success occurred despite the availability of many advanced project management tools and techniques, leading to project failures and less development of the agricultural sector, which requires exploring how to improve project practices beyond operational and tactical levels using existing tools and techniques.

Concurrently project steering committees are acknowledged as essential structural elements in project success and are widely used in agricultural projects for success enhancement (Meredith & Zwikael, 2020). Steering committees account for good project governance, which positively affects success and sustainably shapes the economy. Whilst the steering committee operates at a strategic level, its function and influence on project success necessitate further investigation, though widely discussed in the literature (Lechler & Cohen, 2009; Mosavi, 2014; Locatelli et al., 2017; Meredith & Zwikael, 2020). This investigation is based on limited evidence of any consideration of how these committees would interact with existing power structures that are hierarchical and repressive. The need to investigate the concept of the steering committee in agricultural projects in a hierarchical environment, which had primarily been ignored, became evident. Lechler and Cohen (2009) reminded us that there is room to expand our understanding of steering committees. Therefore, much empirical research on steering group activities in agricultural projects as a required condition to achieve success is needed. Thus, this study aims to explore the key functions of a project steering committee in relation to large-scale agricultural project success and compare the position of project owners and that of the steering committee.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. The development and model of the steering committee**

Steering committees now frequently appear as part of best practices in guides for project management (Kerzner, 2022; Louw et al., 2021). A steering committee is viewed as an instrumental governance mechanism that adds to project governance's sophistication and subsequently forms a key success factor (Meredith & Zwikael, 2020; Drake & Bekker, 2023). Scholars indicate two intertwined motivations for bringing steering committees into existence, which included the introduction of a democratic decision-making process to alter the autocratic, hierarchical organisational power structure that exists in large-scale projects and the second to foster collaboration while gaining the benefit of input from multiple sources (stakeholders) in order to enhance projects successes (McGrath & Whitty, 2018; Meredith & Zwikael, 2020; Louw et al., 2021). These are not new, as Karimi et al. (2000) had considered the concept of steering committees as a corporate philosophy of having the users take responsibility for planning and controlling the function of specific projects in much the same way that a Board of Directors takes responsibility for planning and controlling the entire company. One can argue here that the steering committee can be considered a form of organisational democratisation. Some detail about the purpose and function of the steering committee has been set out in terms of its roles which include direction setting, rationing resources and advising (Lechler & Cohen, 2009; Mosavi, 2014). Though management by committee generally has a bad name, this is more so for large-scale agricultural projects that involve diverse stakeholders with different expectations (Martinsuo & Geraldi, 2020).

Furthermore, there is a multiplicity of opinions on the formation and composition of the 'ideal' steering committee to produce the earlier mentioned motivations reported by Kirsch (1997). So the term steering committee was initially used to denote a group that contains important parties or actors and works cooperatively to understand problems and generate solutions while linking the temporary project organisation with the parent organisation (Kirsch, 1997). Drury (1984) had earlier suggested that 'steering' was a generic term encompassing any committee involved with projects. However, the operation of steering committees since the early 1980s has evidently been problematic, as steering committees needed a standard descriptor for project oversight for failure or success (McGrath et al., 2018). This is even more evident in agricultural projects in which the sector remains least developed in developing nations, while a large-scale project with functional steering committees seems to be the solution to success (IFAD, 2018)

## **2.2. The steering committee in the context of Cameroon's large-scale project**

The hierarchical organisation model is used in implementing all government projects (Folefack et al., 2020). They are usually under the primary responsibility of the Ministry in Charge of Agriculture (MINADER) and comprise a Project Steering Committee, a Project Coordination Team at the national level, and Regional Coordination Units made up of appointed members for approved projects (IFAD, 2010). When other components are linked to other ministries, then the Project Steering Committee would have a multi-ministerial composition and will be co-chaired by the Secretaries-General of MINADER. The vice-chair is often an expert from any other ministry directly involved in one of the main components (Horwitz, 2014). In the context of agricultural projects, the committee ensure overall performance oversight and policy guidance by approving the Project's Annual Work Plan and Budget prepared by the project coordination team, overseeing the overall performance of the project and providing policy guidance, suggesting necessary project adjustments based on continuous monitoring and evaluation results, and approving subsequent updates of the Project Implementation Manual (Horwitz, 2014; IFAD, 2010). The use of a steering committee is not new, as applied to large-scale projects. Statistics reported by Wrycza (2011) showed that IT projects with appointed steering committees were more successful than those without them. The agricultural projects with appointed steering committees in Cameroon have yet to be successful, given the current low level of development (Folefack et al., 2020, Horwitz, 2014). McGrath & Whitty (2018) is convinced that the use of the term 'steering' could be used to describe only a committee that either votes or operates on a consensus (veto) basis, and the term 'advisory' could be used to describe all other committees that provide advice. The critical functions of a steering committee included the identification of project priorities, identification and management of potential risks and provision of steering on budget, schedule, and quality (Kutilla et al., 2014; Pemsel & Wiewiora, 2019; Folefack et al., 2020; Drake & Bekker, 2023).

## **2.3. The need and function of the steering committee in large-scale agricultural project**

Projects are important mechanisms for achieving agricultural development goals. Large-scale agricultural projects are complex and have a long-term impact on the economy, the environment, and the society in which they exist (Borras et al., 2020). There is an anticipated increase in expenditure on such projects, according to Ouma (2020). This increase in terms of cost and magnitude can be attributed to population and economic growth, which is leading to increasing food demand (Ouma, 2020). Increasing scale poses risks of failure and requires successful implementation to secure economic, social and environmental sustainability. Previously, the success of a large-scale agricultural project was assessed when the project had reached its goal in terms of cost, time, and quality/performance (Donner et al., 2021). However, Donner et al. (2021) further contested that other factors, such as sustainability, social acceptance, and environmental impact, have become more pertinent. When we limit ourselves to the volume produced versus the imported volume of agricultural commodities targeted by large-scale projects, the success rate could be much higher and better. The steering committee and active intervention and management involvement are important (Martinsuo & Geraldi, 2020). It has recently been argued that a steering committee's involvement in capital projects is paramount in achieving project success (Drake & Bekker, 2023). One of the key problems of the projects is resourcing, especially when the project-based organisation is fitted inside a hierarchical structure (Kutilla et al., 2014). It has been discovered that a common problem in such structures is that there needs to be more people trying to steer too many projects in parallel (Jewer & McKay 2012). As such, this needs to be improved when aligning projects with the institutions' strategy (Drake & Bekker, 2023). Drake & Bekker (2023) did encounter the typical problem of multi-national and large-scale capital projects, namely limited project steering committee skills in terms of technical and interpersonal skills, which are required for effective functioning and project success. Large-scale donors also nominate country coordinators to harmonise the procedures (IFAD, 2010; Norton & Alwang, 2020). This is also valid in the larger scale agricultural projects in Cameroon, where over 70% of their budgets are provided for by large-scale donors under the management of country coordinators required to align agricultural development objectives with the international ones as well as a standard framework for international collaboration (IFAD 2018). Standard framework in large-scale projects has limited benefit or success of agricultural projects in many areas (Rezvani & Khosravi, 2019) even when such projects are profitable for owners. Agricultural project owners are sometimes required to create autonomous business models as a side-product if success is expected in a hierarchical framework of support due to continuous changes in the business environment these days (Rezvani & Khosravi, 2019). Pemsel and Wiewiora (2019) discovered that the steering committee is a vital

brokerage and communication point between the project owners and top management, providing the needed resources. Such communications should be extended to external stakeholders and consumers (Norton & Alwang, 2020). Moreover, project owners usually have specific managers to manage project portfolios and align them with the institution's goals following project procedures (Kutilla et al., 2014).

Standards and procedures have been observed to have a positive influence on the implementation of national projects by Kutilla et al. (2014). The standardised procedures in project implementation are more prevalent in new projects and have positively influenced project performance. This is seen in nearly all multilateral donor-sponsored projects Ogunlana (2010). In cases where beneficiaries have limited experience with such standards and procedures, they are trained to ensure conformity and commitments to the whole project even when they only work on the part of the whole (Gerbault 2012). In cases where there seems to be less understanding of the standard, donors preferred the involvement of an appointed steering committee (Horwitz, 2014). Moreover, Lechler & Cohen (2009) revealed that effective steering committee work is important for project success as they actively define, initiate, steer and control the project's execution throughout its life cycle. A steering committee is the main decision-making body of the project and makes all-significant decisions, including approval of the project results.

All the steering committee representatives should be totally committed to the project's success (Karimi et al., 2000). The crucial issue is that steering committee members have enough interest and time for the project, defined roles, and sufficient mandate for decision-making regarding project results and resource reallocation (Mosavi, 2014; McGrath & Whitty, 2018). In addition, the steering committee should meet regularly to monitor and evaluate progress, which is essential in overall project risk management and the success of projects (Kutilla et al., 2014).

### **3. Methodology**

This study focused on steering committees in agricultural large-scale projects in Cameroon. The research design followed a mixed-method approach, combining semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. The snowballing technique was used to identify relevant key respondents within the framework of large-scale agricultural projects, as respondents were initially unknown to the researcher. Respondents were included if they had been a member of the steering committee in the past or were currently as well aware of large-scale agricultural projects. The questionnaire was administered over 3 months in the last quarter of 2022 via emails. 120 questionnaires were sent out; 95 were returned with 5 incomplete, leaving 90 (50 from project owners or beneficiaries of PIDMA and PADFA projects and 40 from steering committee members) that were used for analysis. After the survey, interviews were scheduled with experts and participants of the steering committee in the first quarter of 2023.

The interview questions were derived from the survey questionnaire, targeting 5 steering committee members and 5 experts in large-scale agricultural projects, after which the data collated from the interviews were used to refine the questionnaire. Key principles of ethical considerations identified by Easterby-Smith et al. (2018) were applied to protect the interest of the research participants and the integrity of the research results (accuracy and no bias). The questionnaire was divided into two sections; the first considered general information about respondents, and the second on tackling the functions of the steering committee (roles of the committee, communications, decision line, and skills set). The second part focused on ranking and ordinal scale data. On the one hand, ranking data was required to determine the level of importance of some steering committee functions, as perceived by the participants. On the other hand, ordinal scales were used to analyse survey responses; Likert's response, "Strongly disagree", was associated with a numerical value of 1, whilst "Strongly agree" was associated with the number 5. Friedman analysis and Cronbach's Alpha analysis at a significance level of 0.07 (7%) adopted by Drake & Bekker (2023) were used. The Phi coefficient was also calculated to measure the strength of the association between variables.

### **4. Results**

Participants of the survey were divided into two categories: project managers or presidents of agricultural cooperatives that benefited from PIDMA and PADFA projects considered here as project owners and persons who are or have been members of steering committees, with females constituting 30% of project owners, with 7 years of experiences on average in large scale agricultural project management while males were 70% with 10 years. Members of the steering committee that participated were 20% females and 80% males, with 6 and 10 years of experience in that position for females and males, respectively.



#### 4.1. The role of steering committee members

The result about the role or function of steering committee members was examined from the perspective of project owners in comparison to project steering committee members. Based on Figure 1 of the survey responses, the most agreed role was validating project results, where all respondents agreed, and second was the custodian of project governance, where 90% of steering committee members and 80% of project owners agreed. In that order, the third was to review project performance, to which 70% and 80% of the project owner and steering committee members agreed. Next was to resolve conflicts between stakeholder groups where at least 50% and 70% of project owners and steering committee members agreed. The least agreed upon role included identifying project priorities, which was agreed upon by about 20% of the project owners and 30% of the steering committee members. The identification and management of potential risks was also agreed upon by only 20% of project owners and 50% by steering committee members. This was similar to the provision of steering on budget, schedule, and quality, in which 40% and 50% of project owners and steering committee members agreed.

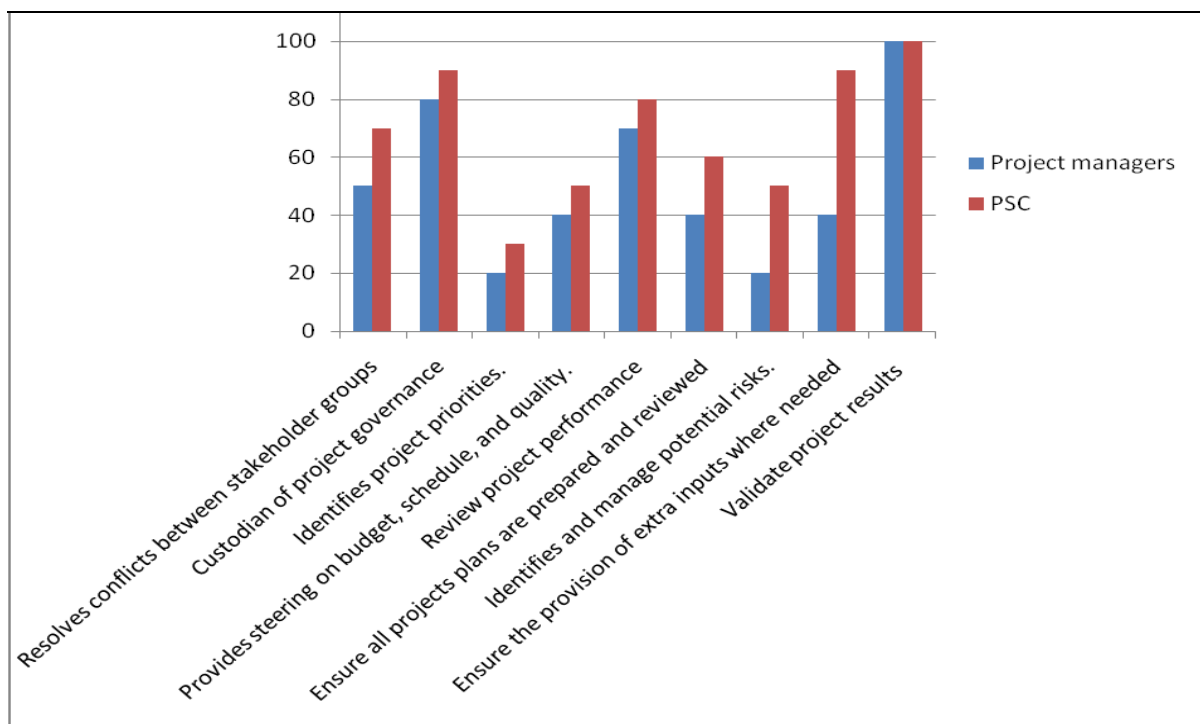


Figure 1: Function of the steering committee

Table 1 below summarises how respondents understood and agreed to the critical roles of the steering committee.

**Table 1: Understanding the roles of the steering committee**

Variables	Identifies project priorities	Identifies and manages potential risks	Provides steering on budget, schedule, and quality
Mean	3.85	3.93	3.9
Cronbach's alpha		0.79	
Overall mean		3.89	

The overall mean of 3.89 indicates that most respondents understand that steering committee members are supposed to be responsible for the identification of project priorities, identification and management of

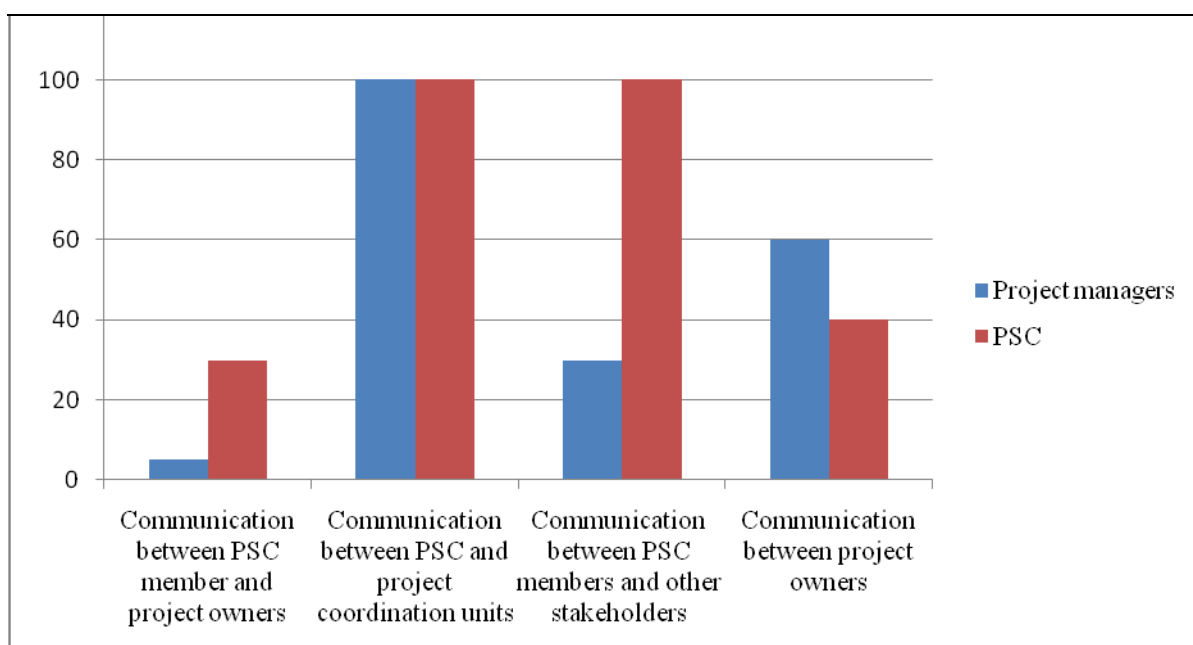
potential risks and provision of steering on budget, schedule, and quality. In addition, these variables are considered reliable in measuring the construct, given the Cronbach alpha coefficient greater than 0.7. The involvement of a steering committee in large-scale agricultural project management was further investigated. Table 2 below summarises the survey responses to key project management variables. Modes 4 and 2 show that an agreement still needs to be reached that a steering committee will be involved in selected phases of agricultural project management. The only phases in which the steering committee has been actively involved include cost influence, funding/capital acquisition and scope change. They are less actively involved in the project development phase, schedule change and execution. Phi Coefficient test was conducted to determine how the steering committee's involvement in project phases affects project success, and the results show an insignificant relation between variables, with Phi coefficient values ranging between -0.17 and 0.07, as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Involvement of steering committee in key phases of projects**

Variables	Mode	Phi Coefficient
Actively involved in the development phase	2	0.03
Project cost influence	4	-0.05
Schedule change	2	-0.15
Involvement in execution	2	0.06
Funding/capital acquisition	4	-0.03
Scope change	4	-0.13

#### 4.2. Communication management

Communication between steering committee members, the project manager and other stakeholders was considered vital in performing the functions of such a committee. This result should limit formal communication between the committee and project owners from both perspectives. The results show from the survey indicated that all respondents agreed to a minor extent of communication between steering committee members and project owners, as only 5% of project owners agreed and 30 % of steering committee members. There was a similar agreement to formal communication between project owners in which 60% of owners agreed, and 40% of steering committee members did as well. However, it was observed that there is a total formal communication between steering community members and the coordination unit of agricultural projects, given 100% agreement from all respondents. The same 100% agreement was observed from steering community members regarding communications with all stakeholders, while only 30% of project owners agreed.



**Figure 2: Interaction between steering committee member, project owner and other stakeholders**

Table 3 below summarises the survey results on communication management in relation to project performance. An overall mean of 3.72 shows a greater extent to which respondents see communication as a key to the performance of steering committee members' functions. Even though a clear correlation between project performance and good communication may not be determined from the results, the Cronbach alpha coefficient greater than 0.7 indicates that the set of variables is reliable in measuring the communication management construct of the project steering committee.

**Table 3: PSC's Communication with Stakeholders**

		N	%	
Case	Valid	85	85	
	Excluded	5	15	
	Total	90	100	
a. Likewise deleted based on all variables in the procedure				
Variable	Communication between PSC members and project owners	Communication between PSC and project coordination units	Communication between PSC members and other stakeholders	Communication between project owners
Mean	3.75	3.58	3.9	3.41
Cronbach's alpha			0.91	
Overall Mean			3.72	

### 4.3. Decision line

The steering committee decision line in relation to project success was investigated by considering their roles and responsibilities that are likely to influence project performance. The overall high mode of at least 4 showed that respondents agreed to a greater extent to the decision line variables with respect to roles and responsibilities being defined at the onset of the project, prioritisation of the project based on agricultural development needs and power to end or extent ongoing projects as seen on Table 4. Nevertheless, the Phi Coefficients of -0.11 and -0.04 indicated an insignificant correlation between the variables and project success; concluding is difficult.

Table 4: Steering committee decision line

Variables	Mode	Response	Phi Coefficient
Clearly defined roles and responsibilities of PSC members	4	Agree	-0.11
PSC prioritised projects based on agri-development needs	4	Agree	-0.04
Decided when to end or extend a project per sector	5	Agree	-0.04

### 4.4. Skills

A set of 10 key steering committee member skills adapted from literature (Lechler & Cohen, 2009; Mosavi, 2014; McGrath & Whitty, 2018; Meredith & Zwikael, 2020; Folefack et al., 2020 ) were tested. This list compilation was presented to respondents for their ranking in order of importance. In order to make a link between key functions, the skills were required, and respondents were asked to rank them, starting with the most important to the least. Table 5 below summarises the ranking of the skills set by project owners and steering committee members.

**Table 5: Skills set of a steering committee**

Skills	Project managers	PSC
Skill 1: Resource Management	3	10
Skill 2: Stakeholder Management	1	1
Skill 3: Project Governance	6	2
Skill 4: Risk and Conflict Management	4	5
Skill 5: Time Management	9	8
Skill 6: Communication Management	3	3
Skill 7: Cost Management	2	9
Skill 8: Quality Management	3	4
Skill 9: Problem-Solving	5	6
Skill 10: Project management	8	7

It is imperative to note first that the difference in the rankings is statistically significant given the Friedman coefficient ( $F(r) < 0.05$ ). Based on the calculated modes of the survey responses, the five highest-ranked skills by the project owner were Stakeholder Management, Cost Management, Resource Management, Communication Management and Risk, as well as conflict Management. For steering committee members, the highest rank skills included Stakeholder Management, Project Governance, Communication Management, Quality Management and Risk, as well as conflict Management.

## 5. Discussion

Managing and working on large-scale agricultural projects in order to develop the sector for the benefit of all is challenging. These projects required the optimal functioning of the steering committee to guarantee success. It was observed that the functions of committee members to identify project priorities, identify and manage potential risks and provide steering on budget, schedule, and quality were least accepted by survey respondents. This result contradicts suggestions from scholars who had identified these functions as fundamental to the steering committee (Kutilla et al., 2014; Pemsel & Wiewiora, 2019; Folefack et al., 2020; Drake & Bekker, 2023). McGrath and Whitty (2018) are convinced that when a committee does not provide budget, schedule, and quality steering, the term ‘advisory’ could be used to describe them. One can argue that current large-scale agricultural project steering committees are performing advisory roles instead of steering.

The literature identified communication management as one of the steering committee's essential functions. Pemsel & Wiewiora (2019) stressed the need for communication between project owners and top management or steering committees providing the needed resources as it is important for upfront planning and its positive effects on project success. Norton & Alwang (2020) added that such communications should be extended to external stakeholders and consumers, which is needed for project success. Even though the study showed a greater extent to which respondents see communication as a key to the performance of steering committee functions, a clear correlation between these variables could not be determined. This is supported by the limited formal communications between steering committee members and project owners, with less than 30% of respondents agreeing to the existence of formal communications.

The survey results showed a definite association between project success and decision line variables concerning roles and responsibilities being defined at the project's onset, project prioritisation based on agricultural development needs and power to end or extend ongoing projects. This power is an important trait the committee requires, as it ensures projects are aligned with the agricultural development objectives and partners' strategy. This is in line with the scholars' (McGrath & Whitty, 2018; Meredith & Zwikael, 2020; and Louw et al., 2021) contention that steering committees bring about a democratic decision-making process alters the autocratic, hierarchical organisational power structure that exists in large scale projects and foster collaboration while gaining the benefit of input from multiple sources (stakeholders) in order to enhance projects successes. However, an insignificant correlation between the variables and project success was observed (Phi Coefficients of -0.11 and -0.04). Therefore, decision line variables might also be considered as one of the significant factors that limit the performance of large-scale agricultural projects.



This limitation is more likely to be ascribed to less clarity in the steering committee members' decision line or sphere of influence.

Researchers have pointed out key functions of steering committee members, which require specific skills. The result shows different perceptions of the expected skills from project owners and committee members. The different ranking was considered significant given the Friedman coefficient ( $F(r) < 0.05$ ). However, skills highly valued by both categories included stakeholder management, communication management, risk, and conflict management. A significant variance was noted in the rating of the skills set as specified in the literature, and the rating of skills was based on project practitioners' experience level (Mosavi, 2014). A similar trend is recently noted in the study by Drake and Bekker (2023). In their study of functions of project steering committees in large capital projects in South Africa, they found a consensus on the ratings of the steering committee competencies, with variance noted. They attributed that to factors such as participants' project experience, the project's type and location, and the steering committee construct in different organisations.

This implies that more experienced respondents consider inter-organisational skills such as stakeholder and risk management competencies more critical than project management. This skill requirement may be ascribed to the fact that the more experienced project management steering committee with skills that can improve the performance of their projects compared to less experienced practitioners.

## 6. Conclusion

Large-scale agricultural projects are essential in enhancing the sector's development in developing countries, especially in Cameroon. Local and international actors are working together to implement several projects while spending billions of dollars yearly. Scholars have suggested that a project steering committee is an important factor that can enhance project success as it supports implementation and management activities carried out by different supportive actors. The functions of such steering committees in large-scale agricultural projects sometimes need to be better executed to increase low-level agricultural project success. This study highlighted the function of a project steering committee within the framework of large-scale agricultural project sponsors by the World Bank and IFAD in Cameroon. The top three functions identified included validation of project results, project governance custodian, and project performance review. These are different from the suggestion from the literature that pointed to the identification of project priorities, identification and management of potential risks and provision of steering on budget, schedule, and quality, which respondents of the survey least accepted. Therefore, the agricultural steering committee might have missed out on their most important functions. The current focus of the committees can be attributed to limited formal communication between the steering committee and project owners and less clarity in their decision line or sphere of influence concerning the implementation of large-scale projects in the agricultural sector. It is recommended that roles and responsibilities concerning functions of the steering committee should be defined at the onset of the project, with a clear indication of their sphere of influence to improve project management and guarantee success.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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