

Managing Multilevel Stakeholder Engagement in Vision and Strategy Making: The Case of Aseer Region

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(Received 16/7/2020; accepted for publication 15/11/2020.)

Abstract: Using a case study approach, this research investigates multilevel stakeholder engagement in regional development. The case was Aseer, an untapped region of Saudi Arabia with unique beauty and culture. The Aseer Development Authority (ASDA) adopted planning processes to build a regional strategy and vision that assessed current socioeconomic conditions and competitive advantages, incorporated infrastructure investments, and developed projects to boost tourism and other industries. Data sources included ASDA reports of the region describing the socioeconomic conditions, geography, and environment; observations, interviews, and notes taken during dozens of workshops and meetings conducted during the project; and documents and presentations made by the planning team. Through an in-depth analysis of the engagement objectives, methods, tools, level of involvement, and leadership, the various stages of stakeholder engagement at the local, regional, and national level are presented. Results show that continuous alignment across government levels helped to foster effective engagement, establish a shared vision, and deliver a robust regional strategy.

Keywords: regional vision, development strategy, stakeholder engagement, policy coordination, Aseer Development Authority, Aseer Region, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

1. Introduction

Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is going through a dramatic socioeconomic transformation that aims to harness the country's development potential and reduce its reliance on the oil industry. The plan was announced on April 25, 2016, when the government revealed national programs and projects to revitalize sectors such as infrastructure, housing, trade, tourism, entertainment, culture, manufacturing, and military equipment. These programs were based on thorough analyses that confirmed their viability and conformity with the three overarching goals of Vision 2030: vibrant society, thriving economy, and ambitious nation (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Consequently, the national ministries developed their own respective transformation objectives, plans, budgets, and key performance in-

dicators (KPIs). In 2018, the government introduced regional development authorities to coordinate development efforts and support implementation of the national program in five targeted regions and one city, Makkah AlMukarrmah, AlMadinah Almunwarah, Sharqiah, Aseer, Hail, and Riyadh City. The new entities have embarked on vision and strategy exercises to understand regional spatial characteristics and economic potential, and to integrate sectoral policies in the most competitively advantageous ways.

As one of the newly established authorities, Aseer Development Authority (ASDA) started its journey with two fundamental steps: forming a regional development vision and strategy, and creating a new regional governance framework to coordinate development projects and programs. These tasks are far from easy in light of current challenges with policy fragmentation, poor

infrastructure, insufficient resources, and, most importantly, the difficult geography, which has hindered previous development efforts in the region. On the other hand, Aseer is an untapped region with great things to offer; it possesses unique natural and cultural resources that constitute a bedrock for tourism development. The vision and development strategy focused on tapping the two significant assets of culture and nature to create a new global destination for tourists who are eager to discover southern Saudi Arabia. ASDA has followed a unique path to develop its regional vision by engaging multiple stakeholders from local, regional, and national levels. The engagement efforts were a massive resource and time investment from ASDA and its leadership, who encouraged wider participation of the Aseer community, government and nongovernment organizations, and the private sector. These stakeholders will implement the regional strategy under ASDA's supervision.

This research explores the multilevel stakeholder engagement conducted during Aseer's regional strategy development project. It sheds light on important interactions between actors dealing with multiple competing interests and bridging differences to form a shared desired future. This research is important because it examines a new practice of regional vision and strategy making in Saudi Arabia. Previous regional development efforts have not followed a similar approach of stakeholder engagement, nor have they focused on building strategy, programs, and projects to be implemented through coordination with a regional development authority (Almughairy, 2019). Hence, analyzing Aseer's approach can tell policymakers a great deal about how to generate vision and strategy from stakeholders with diverse worldviews, interests, and development needs. Through a case study investigation, the author draws on first-hand experience as a manager of the strategy team to outline different stakeholder engagement approaches at the local, regional, and national levels. Well-designed participation methods, a mobilization plan, and clear objectives facilitated cooperation between all levels of governance, capturing issues that mattered to stakeholders with greater certainty.

The next sections explain seminal ideas about regional development and the role of stakeholder engagement in effective policy coordination. This is followed by exploring the context of Aseer region,

its development authority, and pathways to grant regional strategy approval. After an outline of the research methodology, the results and discussion are then presented and concluding remarks are offered.

2. Literature review

2.1 Regional development strategy and stakeholder engagement

Regional vision and development strategies have become widespread as regions navigate global economic competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion (Rodríguez-Pose and Wilkie, 2017). A comprehensive development strategy aims to integrate sectoral policies with spatial development based on a rigorous analysis of socioeconomic conditions and competitive advantages (Albrechts and Baldacci, 2013; Pugalís and Gray, 2016). Planning practitioners describe development vision and strategy as transformative practices that should occur before spatial planning; they reposition the region within the national and global economy and set development objectives to be pursued through spatial allocation of lands, resources, and infrastructure investments (Albrechts and Baldacci, 2013; Rodríguez-Pose and Wilkie, 2017). Meanwhile, policy and decision-makers consider regional vision and strategy documents as blueprints for development, whereby they distribute resources and pursue projects according to the predefined objectives and timelines (Harmaakorpi and Niukkanen, 2002).

In practice, regional strategy making depends heavily on a participatory approach: stakeholders share knowledge, debate policies, and modify practices to achieve a desired future (Jovovic et al., 2017). Successful regional strategy is designed through intensive participation by organizational and individual stakeholders, who affect and are in turn affected by the decisions, policies, and programs adopted (Freeman, 1984; McEldowney and Sterrett, 2001). Robust stakeholder involvement has become an essential component of the planning process in progressive countries. It not only fulfills democratic values but also enhances the quality of the development strategy by generating policies and solutions that stakeholders can understand and implement successfully (Metzger, 2013). For these practical reasons, the European Union has demanded stakeholder engagement for regions who apply for smart structural

funds to boost their economic competitiveness (Sotara, 2018; Wanner and Pröbstl-Haider, 2019). Methods of stakeholder engagement can be found across a broad spectrum of development subjects, such as environmental conservation and resource management (Lee, 2007; Nared et al., 2015), sustainable tourism development (Byrd, 2007; Stokes, 2008), mega transportation systems (Erkul et al., 2016), climate change adaptation (Conde and Lonsdale, 2004), and public innovation (Godenhjelm and Johanson, 2018).

In regional development, multiple regional actors represent all levels of government, private enterprises, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and individuals. They are heterogeneous, possessing different interests and worldviews about what good a regional vision and strategy will look like (Sisto et al., 2018). Effective stakeholder involvement should be as inclusive as possible, bringing many ideas to the table and having experts and policymakers test them. It should also enable participants to better understand their future role in implementation and how they would contribute to achieving the strategy objectives (Wanner and Pröbstl-Haider, 2019). Other benefits of stakeholder engagement include better education for participants on development challenges, better decisions through integration of sectoral policies, saved resources through coordination and the reduced chance of adopting a poor policy choice, creative solutions that result from collaboration, and, most important, an increased sense of responsibility toward a common future (Byrd, 2007; Twigg, 1999). Despite these benefits, stakeholder engagement is a daunting undertaking within the context of regional development. It needs careful planning and mapping of relevant stakeholders from multiple engagement arenas. Stakeholder input must be tailored to serve the purpose of creating a shared vision desired by the wider community, and, equally important, regional leadership has a key role to play to support effective participation throughout the strategy-making process.

Obviously, planning for stakeholder engagement starts with fundamental questions about who should be engaged and what level or depth of engagement they should have. The first question should be answered on the bases of the scale and scope of the project (Murray and Greer, 2002). The scale of a region is large. Hence, the planning team's first task is to clearly define the

geographic area of the project, then classify key regional and local actors who should take part in the planning process (McEldowney and Sterrett, 2001). The list will include government and private-sector organizations, industry-based and social groups, and individuals who possess important information or special knowledge about the region. Some experts warn against excluding certain actors, marginalizing them due to geographic isolation, or not allowing them strong representation on the regional stage (Halseth et al., 2007). Mapping stakeholders should not be decided in one or two meetings. Rather, the list should be refined throughout the planning phases to ensure that no important actor has been left behind (Murray and Greer, 2002). The second question, of how deep engagement should go, will be decided on the bases of the availability of resources and time set for the regional strategy project (Baker et al., 2010). Another way to answer this question is to classify stakeholder participation into four categories:

1. Collaboration, for those with greater influence in planning and implementation;
2. Involvement, for those who possess the knowledge and capacity to participate and need to be contacted regularly based on rising issues;
3. Consulting, for groups or individuals interested in the project but not influential due to lack of knowledge or capacity; and
4. Informing, for the general public (Life Urbanproof, 2016).

It is hard to keep the public engaged throughout a project, but communication is important, and the public can easily be informed through the media or other communication tools (Life Urbanproof, 2016).

Another aspect of conducting stakeholder engagement is determined by the design and quality of the engagement process. After stakeholder mapping, the planning team needs to collect information about regional actors: their backgrounds, interests, relationships, and history with previous collaboration endeavors (Sayce et al., 2013). These data are useful when teams decide on whom to engage first, how many meetings or events should be held, which communication or facilitation style to use, what meeting structure to adopt (e.g., workshop, focus group, one-on-one interview, conference), and how to address accessibility and fairness of inclusion (Hartley and Wood, 2005; Hassenforder et al., 2016). The

team should tailor meetings to best accommodate the unique composition of stakeholder groups (Metzger, 2013). Presentations should include essential information about project scope, objectives, team members, meetings, and discussion points relevant to participant interest (Fernandes et al., 2019). There are no hard and fast rules about how to engage stakeholders to generate the most effective regional development vision and strategy; however, the involvement process should be managed carefully, continually applying lessons learned from one session to another until the project is complete (Sisto et al., 2018).

Lastly, supportive regional leadership is an integral part of successful regional strategy. Sotarauta (2018) asserted that charismatic and knowledgeable regional leaders who invest time travelling across the region to understand development needs are then more likely to invest time and resources into developing a strategy that is inclusive of all local voices. He defined this quality as ‘place leadership’ (Sotarauta, 2018, 10). Another key benefit of involved regional leaders is that they make strategy the focal discussion for government and nongovernment actors, carrying that dialogue across local, regional, and national arenas to ensure greater alignment and thus greater viability for the regional vision and development future (28). Facilitative leaders strengthen networked governance and the collaborative spirit between institutions to realize common benefits and think beyond turf and fragmentation (Gedikli, 2009; Rapoport et al., 2019).

This research explored multilevel stakeholder engagement during regional strategy development in Aseer, Saudi Arabia, initiated to reposition Aseer as a global destination for sustainable tourism. Through case study investigation, the author draws on his firsthand experience as a manager of the strategy team to outline different stakeholder engagement approaches at the local, regional, and national levels. Well-designed participation methods, a mobilization plan, and clear objectives facilitated cooperation between all levels of governance, capturing issues that mattered to stakeholders with greater certainty. The next section describes the Aseer region and its planning agency, as well as the objectives of the regional vision and strategy project. It is followed by sections on research methods, results and discussion, and concluding remarks.

2.2 Developing regional vision and strategy for Aseer: A paradigm shift

Aseer is a beautiful mountainous region located in southwest Saudi Arabia (see Figure 1). The region has five distinct environments from west to east (MoMRA, 2005):

- The coastal areas (180 km) along the Red Sea;
- The plains of Tuhamah, with their rich vegetation cover;
- The escarpments;
- The Sarawat Mountains, with heights of around 3,000 m above sea level; and
- The inland deserts.

The latest population census indicates that Aseer has 2.2 million inhabitants. Almost half of them live in two urban centers, Abha and Khamis Mushayt; the other half live in small towns and heritage villages located in picturesque mountain valleys and escarpments as well as along the north–south transportation routes. In addition to its natural beauty, the region is gifted with heritage sites, art, food, and cultural traditions that position it to be a global tourism destination. This target fits with Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, which calls for activating the country’s diverse industries to make it less dependent on oil revenue (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The Vision seeks to achieve three main objectives, all of which have relevant targets and programs to make these targets viable: a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Important environmental goals are embedded within these overarching objectives (Alshuwaikhat and Mohammed, 2017).

In June 2018, the national government took a major step toward regional development by approving six development authorities (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018), one of which is the Aseer Development Authority (ASDA). ASDA has a clear mandate to coordinate regional sectoral policies among government departments and manage spatial development of cities and towns, which municipalities previously managed in isolation (Government of Saudi Arabia, 2018). The Governor of Aseer chairs the ASDA board, with wider representation from important national ministries, regional departments, and selected members of Aseer’s civil society. The authority also has an executive committee, with members selected from executives with relevant planning

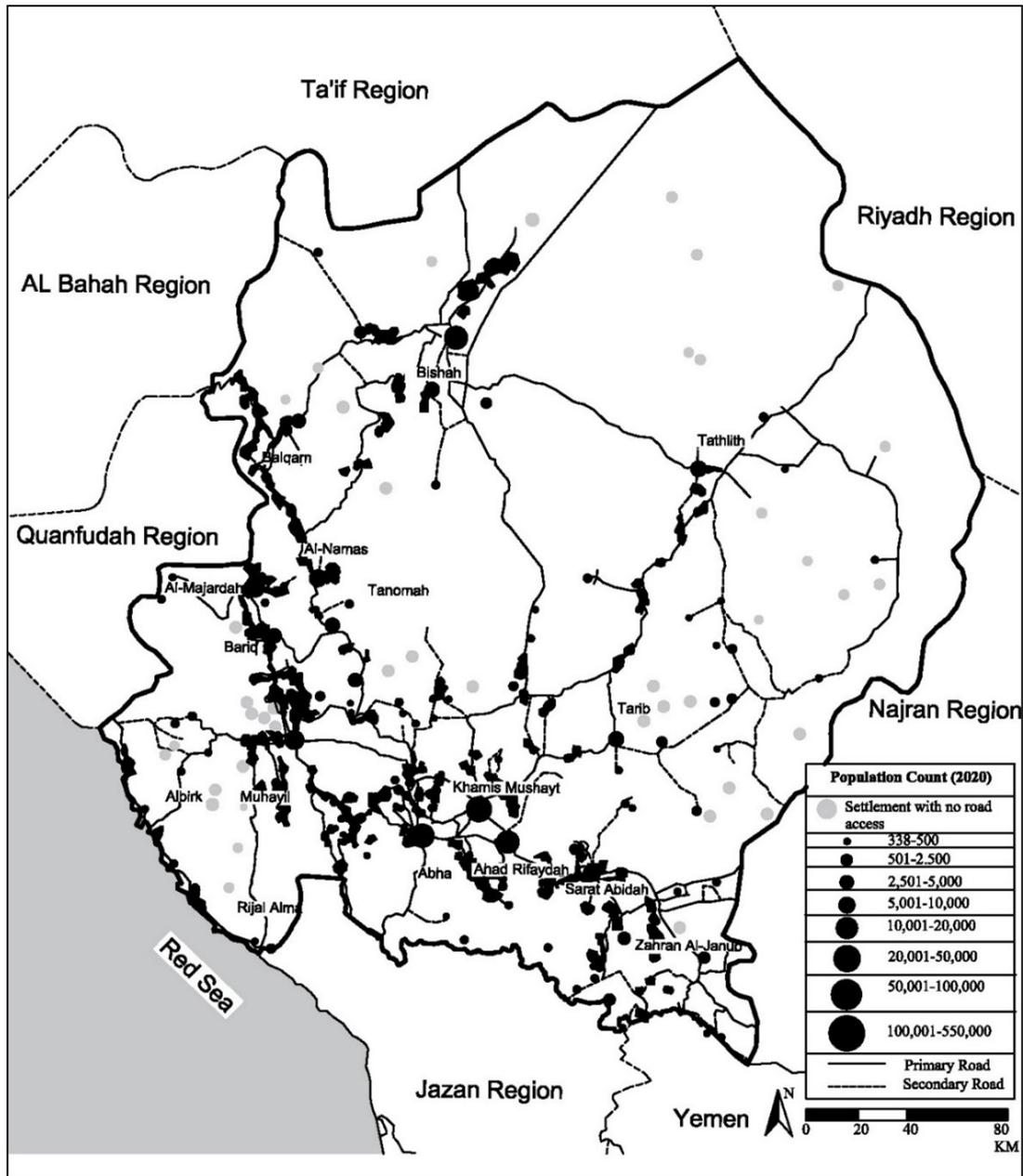


Figure 1. The Aseer region; settlements are concentrated along the Sarawat Mountains (Source: The researcher).

and development experience. Both the executive committee and the ASDA Board approved a road map to make the authority a highly functional organization that meets expectations of the country's leaders as well as the aspirations of leaders of Aseer's communities. The road map comprises two parts: developing a regional vision strategy and designing a viable gover-

nance model for ASDA to operate efficiently and coordinate regional development projects. This paper focuses on the first part, developing a regional vision strategy, but some snapshots of the governance model are explained as needed.

The creation of ASDA, supported by a mandate to develop a regional vision and strategy, marks a paradigm shift from the old-school

regional planning practices used over the last three decades. Previous regional planning endeavors were characterized by top-down, unilateral spatial strategies, lacking participation from regional and local stakeholders, and guided neither by a vision nor by an understanding of sectoral development realities (Almughairy, 2019). Thus, ASDA intentionally took a different path by making stakeholder engagement as a cornerstone of its regional development strategy. Moreover, stakeholder engagement was tailored to fit the local, regional, and national development arenas. As a newly installed development authority with limited technical capacity, ASDA hired a consortium of global consultants to carry out the strategy project in partnership with its local members. This planning team included experts in strategy, economic analysis, tourism development, environment, urban planning, infrastructure, transportation, and organizational design, as well as ideation specialists to manage the visioning exercise.

At inception, the team conducted a current state assessment, compiling contextual data to assess needed research and resources and to create a mobilization plan to complete project deliverables before the deadline (see Figure 2). This phase entailed gathering large amounts of socioeconomic, environmental, and spatial data; surveying the region; and analyzing strengths, weaknesses, and competitive advantages. This was followed by the strategy design phase, in which stakeholders developed a shared regional vision strategy that targeted multiple development objectives, with focus on the tourism sector. Major projects and infrastructure were also defined and given timelines schedules corresponding with the economic model. In Phase 3, Aseer's vision and strategy were moved to the national level to align them with national objectives, test their viability, and ascertain economic impact. Before strategy approval by the Council of Ministers, the Council of Economic and Development Affairs conducted a critical review. This council, the custodian of Vision 2030, gave ASDA constructive feedback on content and alignment. Throughout these phases, stakeholder engagement was instrumental in moving ASDA's strategy through the local, regional, and national arenas.

3. Methods

Case study research is a widely used method for better understanding a certain phenomenon or situation (Yin, 2014). In some case studies, researchers have collected large amounts of data, analyzed them and drew conclusions about a relevant practice or discipline (Yin, 2014). However, the intention is usually not to generalize research findings on a respective field; rather, case study is used to describe processes, illustrate facts, or evaluate approaches employed, to achieve certain results (Harrison et al., 2017). Aseer's regional development vision and strategy has been a rich case study to examine the paradigm shift of regional planning practices in the post-Vision 2030 announcement era.

Research data were collected through three main sources. Primary data were government reports on the socioeconomic conditions, geography, and environment of the Aseer region. Secondary data comprised observations, interviews, and notes taken during the stakeholder workshops and national ministerial meetings conducted throughout the project, and more than 20 reports and presentations made by the planning team. The team travelled over 1,500 km to cover the 16 governorates (local administrative units) of the Aseer region; data were gathered from all of these. Data were then coded and classified to inform comparisons between stakeholder groups and their engagement at local, regional, and national levels. Secondary notes from workshops and presentations were cross-examined with the primary data and compared for context.

4. Results and discussion

Aseer's regional vision and development have created a viable model to manage multilevel stakeholder engagement successfully, paving the way for other regional development authorities to follow. The planning team engaged with more than 2,000 diverse stakeholders (see Table 1), despite the region's difficult geography, which supported greater inclusion, fostered high-quality interactions, facilitated openness, and built trust. Regional leadership strongly supported the effort, instructing departments to work across boundaries, mobilizing governorates, and investing time and resources. At the meetings and workshops, the

team aimed to increase understanding of local development challenges and needs. Its experts identified regional policy gaps between actors and helped them to appreciate the negative effects of a lack of policy coordination. Local and regional stakeholders participated in the vision and strategy making, while national stakeholders played a pivotal role in aligning strategy initiatives and programs with the national vision. Table 2 summarizes the objectives, methods, communication tools, and key results for each level of engagement. s

4.1 Engaging local stakeholders

Aseer’s large, diverse, and difficult geography covers an area of 76,693 km2 (MoMRA, 2005). This fact was the focus of the project planning team’s first meeting, held to strategize the best approach for effective stakeholder engagement. The chairman of the board of ASDA advised putting the people of the region at the fore and center of the regional vision and strategy design. To apply this suggestion, the team discussed next inclusion to a larger map to better grasp Aseer’s scale, geography, and number of urban and rural settlements. The region was divided into northern, eastern, western, and southern subregions, and a travel schedule was arranged based on road accessibility. The provincial government played a supportive role with local stakeholder engagement. A notification letter was sent to each governorate to help with logistical arrangements and invite representative actors municipal council members, women, youth, business leaders, governorate leadership to meet the planning team. At each stop, a tour guide was available to escort team members to meetings and site visits. The guides were knowledgeable about the history and features of the area.

Planning a ‘get out and engage’ approach has proven to be more effective than ‘come to us’, where local stakeholders have to travel hundreds of miles to meet the strategy team (Baker et al., 2010). Indeed, the presence of the team’s 18 international and local experts in Aseer’s cities and villages was met with appreciation and enthusiasm from participants, who understood this as a sign that the regional strategy would represent their interests. When visiting the southern governorates, the governor of the region met with the team and exhibited unique place leadership through stories and characterization of the area’s development challenges and difficult geography. This planned encounter with the governor sent a strong message that there was no hard-to-reach group in planning for Aseer’s future. Difficult geography and accessibility can be a challenge for inclusiveness in regional strategy making (McEldowney and Sterrett, 2001), but this was definitely not the case for Aseer’s regional vision and development strategy.

The hustle of travel and logistics did not prevent the planning team from answering the fundamental question: what do we need from local stakeholders? In earlier meetings, the team identified the following objectives for local visits:

- Explain regional vision and strategy aims and scope such that all stakeholders could understand them.
- Assess development situations through visual observations and site visits.
- Fact-check some secondary data collected from available report and studies.
- Understand views about local development challenges and needs.
- Engage in a discussion about the future of the region.

Table 1. Local, regional, and national stakeholders included throughout the project phases.

Level	Stakeholders
Local	Women, municipal council members, youth groups, business leaders, governorate leadership
Regional	Municipal leaders; regional chamber of commerce; regional council; Aseer youth council; Shora (parliament) members; small, medium, and large business leaders; tourism and hospitality representatives; military suppliers; farmers and food processing representatives; regional transportation and utility leads; academics, historians, and teachers; tribal heads; artists; university students; environmentalists
National	Ministry of the Interior; Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs; Ministry of Economy and Planning; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Environment, Water, and Agriculture; General Investment Authority; Ministry of Tourism, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Telecommunication, Public Investment Fun and Information, Vision Realization Programs, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Labor and Social Development, Ministry of Sport, General Entertainment Authority, General Cultural Authority, Ministry of Media

Source: The researcher.

Table 2.. Local, regional, and national engagement in Aseer's regional development strategy.

Variable	Local level	Regional level	National level
Engagement objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explain regional strategy scope and objectives. - Assess local development needs and challenges. - Understand views on regional future and vision. - Inspect potential locations for tourism development. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Build relationships with regional stakeholders. - Understand development challenges of key policy areas and interest groups. - Coordinate development policy and actions between government departments. - Agree on shared vision and development priorities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share information on vision and development strategy. - Align strategy projects and programs with ministries and vision realisation programmes. - Validate the strategy's economic impact and align with national targets. - Negotiate allocation of budgets and resources to Aseer.
Main development challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development gap between main cities and rural areas. - Fewer job opportunities and less skill development. - Shortage of quality public services offered to local communities. - Protecting environmental assets from development pressures. - Bureaucratic red tape that impedes local businesses from growing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Coordination of development policies between regional departments. - Migration of educated and skilled population to other regions for economic reasons. - Difficult geography that makes infrastructure development costly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Assessing budgets for development programs and projects between regional departments and ministries. - Understanding local and regional growth potential and allocating resources accordingly. - Implementing national policies at the regional level.
Engagement methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Site visit. - Meetings. - Workshops. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Focus group. - One-on-one meetings. - Workshops. - Vision summit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ministerial meetings. - Workshops.
No. of meetings	+50	+50	+70
Communication tools	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentations. - Facilitation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentations. - Facilitation. - Visioning exercise. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentations. - Facilitation. - Interest-based negotiation.
Key results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Comprehensive understanding of local development challenges and needs. - Trust building with local stakeholders. - Inclusive of diverse viewpoints and aspirations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shared vision and development strategy. - Working relationships between government departments to implement the strategy. - Appreciation of networked policy and coordination. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Alignment on key development initiatives and programs in the strategy. - Collaboration with national stakeholders. - Asserting ASDA's role and capacity to coordinate regional development.
Type of regional leadership	Supportive	Supportive	Facilitative.

Source: The researcher.

To achieve these objectives, the team prepared for a certain standard of stakeholder engagement. They began with a presentation introducing the project. It included a statement from ASDA on the importance of working together; the project scope and aims; team members; discussion points about local development challenges, to be presented in rounds of questions; and the future vision for the region. For each governorate, the team first met with public officials, followed by workshops with the various stakeholders, followed by site visits to important attractions. The arranged order of meetings, workshops, and site visits was helpful in triangulating the data and fact checking. To foster high-quality communication between the participants and the team, facilitator services were used to clarify discussion points and

ensure fair and equal opportunity to be heard. Using facilitation brought needed order and on many occasions mitigated against certain voices dominating the discussion (Wanner and Pröbstl-Haider, 2019).

Workshops and meetings across the governorates indicated differences in socio economic development issues for stakeholder groups. For women, high unemployment rates and few job opportunities were points of concern, and poor support for women in business and increasing social pressures were major reasons for their inactive role in the local and regional economy. Young people shared similar views about a dearth of economic and entrepreneurial opportunities for them. They stressed that a lack of entertainment and sport facilities was detrimental to their competitiveness and physical well-being. Local

business leaders were very much focused on economic potential. They agreed that tourism should be the leading economic sector, but they believed that the region had to support tourism by investing more in infrastructure and removing bureaucratic red tape. For municipal council members, the quality and quantity of public services, especially education and healthcare, were conceived as the two major obstacles for local growth. The gap in public services delivery between urban (Abha Metropolitan Area) and rural areas was seen as ever widening. One common positive theme was that Aseer is gifted with many natural assets that need to be harnessed sustainably.

Highlighting the issues raised by the participating groups gave insight into the quality of communication the planning team exhibited. Having experts from multiple development disciplines enriched discussions, especially during the question and answer sessions. Engaging local stakeholders was more relaxed and less interest-based, and with the exception of business leaders, discussions centered around community development interests shared by all. The local engagement significantly increased the team's understanding of issues that would have never been achieved through high-level regional engagement. The team was cautious at this stage about talking prematurely about a potential vision statement or strategy, or making promises about this project being a silver bullet for local development challenges. Rather, they sought to listen to local voices, live Aseer's culture, and experience its diverse geography before planning its future development.

4.2 Engaging regional stakeholders

Planning for regional stakeholder engagement started with multiple brainstorming sessions about who should represent the region and how to categorize them in a way that made sense to the planning team and fulfilled engagement objectives. Stakeholders were first divided according to key policy areas, such as healthcare, education, mining, agriculture, municipal sector, commerce, transportation, and tourism and hospitality. A complementary step was to involve stakeholders across multiple interest groups, including business leaders, environmentalists, historians, artists, academics, teachers, tribal

heads, regional youth council, and university students. The categorization was deemed effective in capturing diverse interests; however, efforts were focused on issues and discussion points relevant to each group (Halseth et al., 2007). Further, the team appreciated that regional engagement brings together policy experts, practitioners, and industry-based groups, and so the team structured the meetings and level of discussions to meet the expectations of these participants.

Well-planned stakeholder engagement reflects positively on the quality of discussions and interactions (Fernandes et al., 2019). In preparing for engagement, the communication team completed the list of names and contact information for each category; meanwhile, the logistics team organized the meeting schedule and set-up. Venues were chosen based on the different engagement approaches (workshop, focus group, one-on-one meeting, and visioning exercise, which offered a valuable opportunity to shape a shared vision for Aseer's future). Most of the focus group sessions were hosted in ASDA's building in Abha, which was creatively designed to reflect a true spirit of collaboration toward Aseer's future. Local paintings and artefacts decorated every corner, and ASDA's welcome slogan enjoined participants to 'meet, think, work together'.

For regional stakeholder engagement, the objectives were as follows:

- Build functional relationships with regional stakeholders who would be responsible for strategy implementation.
- Understand challenges with key policy areas and the development needs of interest groups on the regional scale.
- Engage in thoughtful discussions to change perceptions, promote a shared vision, and develop priorities between different interest groups.
- Coordinate development policy and actions between multiple government departments at the regional level.

Obviously, regional objectives run much deeper than the consulting and observation-based objectives desired from local stakeholder involvement. Therefore, presentation design, quality of engagement, and communication should be more sophisticated to persuade stakeholders of the value of regional vision and increase commitment to the process outcome and

implementation. To illustrate the quality of regional engagement that took place in more than 50 events, two workshops conducted on regional transportation and agricultural policy are highlighted.

The transportation workshop included participants from transportation departments across the region and members of Aseer's regional council. The planning team had invested time in collecting pertinent data on the regional road network, road conditions, and the accessibility of urban and rural communities. High resolution maps and satellite images were hung on the meeting room walls. The presentation started with an overview of the regional strategy project, its phases, why it was important to discuss regional transportation, and what a good, safe, and accessible transportation network would mean to Aseer's economic growth and prosperity. Three rounds of questions were administered to discuss challenges, cast a vision, and set priorities where participants had different views in that regard. To facilitate discussions and clarify information, the team employed a transportation expert who knew a great deal about Aseer's road network. Discussions focused on Aseer's topographical challenges and connectivity between towns along the west coast and the urban centers of Abha and Khamis Mushayt. Another key discussion topic pertained to the disintegration between regional transportation planning and road demand assessed by a transportation committee in the regional council. The team presented data on a regional traffic demand model and facilitated some key solutions and agreements on regional road network priorities. This was a breakthrough that would never have been achieved by working unilaterally through the regional transportation department. Stakeholders, including the Ministry of Transportation, were extremely pleased with the achieved result and decided to take a similar approach with planning for airport expansion as part of Aseer's development strategy. Overall, achieving integrated policy, raising stakeholder awareness of cross-cutting concerns, and explaining connections between spatial plans and socioeconomic policies are core functions in pragmatic regional strategy (Todes, 2004).

Agriculture and rural development were vital sectors in Aseer's regional strategy. The planning team thus invited key regional actors in agriculture policies, including farmers and corporations.

Their presentation introduced the regional strategy project and team, shared some important findings on the agriculture sector from the current state assessment phase, and presented key discussion points about development challenges and the future of the sector. One team member with expertise in agricultural economics was assigned as a facilitator. He managed two discussion rounds with the participants. The Agriculture Department mentioned water scarcity in the region as a hurdle; farmers asserted that the region boasts prime agricultural lands and specialty crops that need to be retained and developed. Challenges around marketing agricultural products and establishing a complete value chain of food processing businesses were discussed thoroughly. Sustainable practices were hardly mentioned; however, the expert did a fair job in explaining them later on. The team noticed some good signs of changing perceptions toward the end of the workshop. Consequently, a unified regional policy agenda and initiatives that serve sustainable agriculture were generated, to be presented at the national level before the Ministry of Environment, Water, and Agriculture (MEWA).

Regarding ASDA's leadership role, the governor's clear intention and strategy from the beginning was not to join most of the regional stakeholder workshops and meetings. He favored supporting engagement efforts with minimal direct involvement to allow for pressure-free participation for regional actors, who worked under his command. He thus avoided influencing the discussions but received daily briefings from the strategy team lead. The Governor took a more enabling role in his calls to break institutional boundaries impeding collaboration between departments, encourage officials to think about prosperity from a regional perspective, and change old practices of unilateral policy-making.

4.3 Engaging national stakeholders

Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 aspires to improve socio economic conditions, diversifying the economy, and making government entities more efficient, effective, and transparent. Planning and strategy making have become the new norm for these entities to set measurable objectives, allocate resources, use key performance indicators (KPIs) to report on progress, and assess challenges on vision

realization. At the national level, the Council of Economic and Development Affairs has established the National Center of Performance Measurement (ADAA) as an autonomous entity to evaluate and report on performance. ASDA was required to submit its development plans, programs, and KPIs to ADAA to start reporting in the implementation phase. An important step to approve ASDA's strategy was to align projects and programs to be implemented through regional branches in Aseer with national ministries. The strategy also needed to be aligned with vision realization programs, which are nationally funded programs, to accelerate and support transformation in key policy areas such as quality of life, privatization, housing, industrial development, and logistics (see Figure 3).

Thus, stakeholder engagement at the national level involved multiple and lengthy negotiation meetings with policymakers who were experienced and knowledgeable in their respective policy areas. The meetings and workshops, led by ASDA leadership, were directed toward greater integration of projects, programs, resources, and budgets. The objectives were as follows:

- Share information about Aseer's development vision and strategy.
- Align projects and programs in the strategy with national ministries and vision realization programs.
- Validate predicted economic impact numbers and align them with national targets.
- Discuss budgets and resources allocated by ministries and adjust with the strategy

accordingly.

The planning team was well prepared to present the whole strategy, engage in expert-to-expert discussions, and negotiate elements to serve regional development interests. For each meeting, the team's presentation included team member introductions, ASDA's regional strategy objectives, methodology employed, Aseer's competitive advantages, analysis results, the vision statement developed by Aseer's people, strategy themes and initiatives, economic impact of the initiatives to justify investment, and initial implementation timeline. To demonstrate the quality of national engagement, the meeting with MEWA is described as an example.

Part of MEWA's plan is a rural development program to achieve Vision 2030 objectives by funding sustainable rural development projects across the kingdom. It allocates budgets based on available national data on rural development potential and evaluation of projects submitted to its regional branches. This top-down approach might lack local planning data to justify spatial distributions of rural development projects. ASDA's regional strategy approach was grounded in a deep understanding of local agricultural practices and challenges, and the potential of rural development throughout Aseer's diverse landscape. At the meeting with MEWA, ASDA shared information about not only rural development projects but also other relevant policy areas and services handled by MEWA, such as water services, dams, the agricultural sector and environmental protection. Leaders

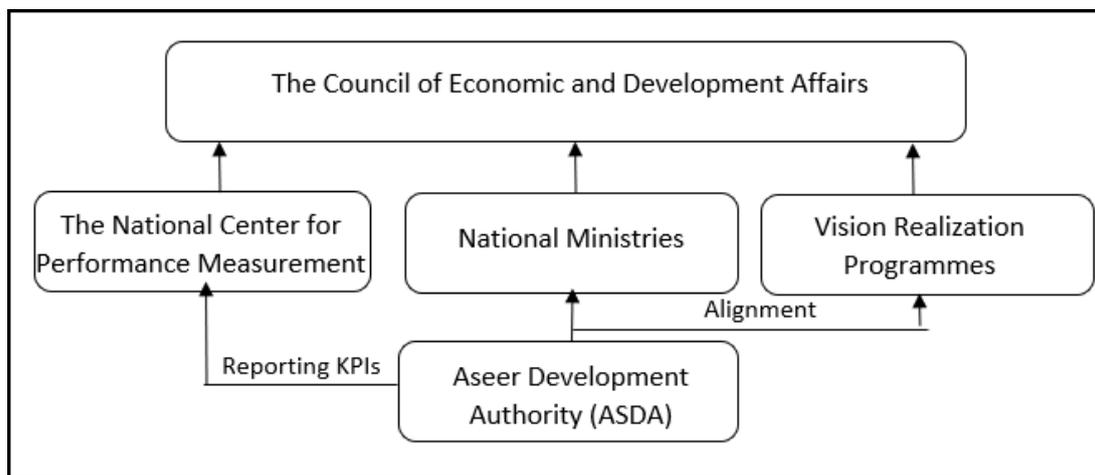


Figure 2. ASDA's strategy initiatives were aligned with national ministries, vision realisation programmes, and The National Center for Performance Measurement (Source: The researcher).

of both teams agreed on the need to have an extended workshop between ASDA's project team and deputy ministers from MEWA to investigate policy intervention, project value, and budgets included in the strategy. At the workshop, some concerns from the ministerial meeting were flushed out and adjustments made by both teams based on shared facts and mutual understanding. As a result, a final ministerial meeting was held to bring ASDA and MEWA leaders to an agreement.

Intense negotiations in most of the national meetings and workshops focused on policy issues. The planning team presented policy options based on an in-depth understanding of Aseer's challenges and a comprehensive view of economic development that integrated sectoral objectives. For example, the team presented an intersectoral coordination case to build a value chain between tourism, infrastructure investment, and transportation to promote a strong tourism industry in a specific area of the region. The strategy's strong connections between sectoral and spatial policies made some national stakeholders revise their resource and budget allocation to meet the regional development objectives. Both ASDA and ministry leadership encouraged these types of policy discussions, trade-offs, and deal-making.

5. Conclusions

The investigation of participatory regional development strategy is critical for a country like Saudi Arabia, that is witnessing a new era of development guided by a grand vision. Regional disparities and insufficient knowledge and practice of regional planning clearly reflect on the capacity of regions and their development authorities to prepare sound regional strategy. Indeed, ASDA and its leadership invested an enormous amount of time and resources to make its strategy a role model for effective stakeholder engagement. The team faced numerous challenges in conducting a participatory regional strategy, from doubts and suspicion of intentions from local stakeholders at the beginning of the project, to complexities of aligning sectoral policies with government institutions at the regional and national levels. National ministries have diverse viewpoints, programs, and policies that need to be reconciled for the good of the region. This put the burden on ASDA to act as a platform for negotiation and alignment between actors beyond the regional strategy project. That said, the approach that ASDA took to identify stakeholder

engagement objectives at each level, prepare well, and use multiple techniques for effective participation and facilitation finally led to regional consensus. It is too early to judge the success or failure of Aseer's regional development strategy, as it is still in the adoption and implementation phases.

What can be concluded is that Aseer's regional vision and development strategy has been an intense exercise to foster vision sharing and collaboration between various stakeholders. Positioning ASDA as a regional planning and development organization, allocating resources, coordinating planning efforts, and strengthening regional leadership were key to managing multilevel stakeholder engagement and delivering the regional vision and strategy. The project has built functional relationships and strong collective policy-making between important regional actors. As a next step, ASDA needs to capitalize on its built regional linkages and carry on the positive spirit to the implementation phase. Institutional linkages and communication plans need to be developed to coordinate actions beyond strategy. Further, ASDA needs to build capacity to monitor economic development, spatial planning, investments, and infrastructure. Sustainable development should be promoted to protect Aseer's environmental assets and balance growth with preservation. Future research and development should address previous development aspects and focus on policy implementation to realize Aseer's bold vision.

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إدارة مشاركة أصحاب المصلحة في بناء رؤية واستراتيجية التطوير: حالة منطقة عسير

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قدم للنشر في ٢٥ / ١١ / ١٤٤١ هـ؛ وقبل للنشر في ٢٢ / ٣ / ١٤٤٢ هـ.

ملخص البحث. تتميز منطقة عسير، التي تقع في جنوب غربي المملكة العربية السعودية، بالتنوع الجغرافي والتراث الثقافي والبيئي الغني الذي يجعل منها وجهة سياحية عالمية تسهم في تنوع مصادر الدخل الوطني الذي نصت عليه رؤية المملكة ٢٠٣٠. لذلك قامت حكومة المملكة بإنشاء هيئة تطوير منطقة عسير بهدف بناء رؤية واستراتيجية لتطوير المنطقة بمشاركة الشركاء كافة من القطاعين الحكومي والخاص والمجتمع المحلي في مدن وقرى عسير. ونظراً لكون هذا المشروع هو الأول من نوعه في استخدام منهجية التخطيط بالمشاركة لتطوير استراتيجية منطقة، فقد اختار الباحث هذه الحالة الدراسية بهدف استكشاف أدوار وأساليب إشراك أصحاب المصلحة (الشركاء) في وضع الرؤية والاستراتيجية ومبادرات التطوير في منطقة عسير. ويسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الاختلافات الأساسية بين مشاركة أصحاب المصلحة على المستويات المحلية والإقليمية والوطنية من خلال مقارنة جوانب جوهرية، مثل: وضع الأهداف والمنهجية واستخدام أدوات المشاركة، كورش العمل والاجتماعات والزيارات الميدانية والتفاوض الفعال، إضافة إلى دور قيادة المنطقة في تحفيز الشركاء على التفاهم والوصول إلى صياغة مشتركة لرؤية واستراتيجية التطوير. واعتمدت منهجية البحث على جمع البيانات من خلال مشاركة الباحث في معظم ورش العمل والاجتماعات والزيارات الميدانية التي صاحبت المشروع، إضافة إلى استخدام المصادر الثانوية عن القطاعات الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والبيئية والمؤسسية في المنطقة. وتشير نتائج البحث إلى أن مشاركة أصحاب المصلحة في عملية التخطيط ساعدت على الفهم المتبادل لأهداف الشركاء، كما أن التنوع في استخدام أدوات المشاركة ساعد على تحقيق التجانس بين خطط وبرامج التطوير المكانية والقطاعية ضمن رؤية واستراتيجية موحدة لتطوير منطقة عسير.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رؤية المنطقة، استراتيجية التطوير، مشاركة أصحاب المصلحة، تنسيق السياسات، هيئة تطوير عسير، منطقة عسير، المملكة العربية السعودية.