

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



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# An ethical salience framework to achieve sustainable development goals

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## Abstract

The global sustainable development goals (SDGs) aspire to achieve fairer outcomes for all. A fundamental tenet of the sustainable development agenda is the pursuit and fulfilment of the needs of those most vulnerable and deprived. However, this has been difficult to achieve partly because it requires a mammoth effort to engage multiple stakeholders over complex timeframes and geographical scales. Thus, we propose a new framework – an Ethical Salience Framework – that we developed through amalgamation of the ethical need-entitlement-desert framework, and the managerial stakeholder salience framework. The new framework provides a better instrumental interpretation of stakeholder salience through incorporating ethical principles. The new framework also focuses on society's deontological obligations to deprived stakeholders. Instead of a single cluster of high-salience stakeholders, we propose deontological and instrumental clusters. We propose stakeholders occupying both clusters are equally important for the successful achievement of the SDGs, but also institutional goals more broadly.

## KEYWORDS

deontology, ethical salience, needs, SDGs, stakeholder salience, sustainable development

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development is the psalm of the vulnerable and deprived. The seminal definition of sustainable development describes it as development that meets the needs of the present while safeguarding Earth's life-support systems, on which present and future generations depend to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987; Emas, 2015). With the sustainable development goals (SDGs) developed under the aegis of the United Nations in September 2015, attention is now on their achievement (Persson et al., 2016). These goals are designed to address a range of sustainable development challenges on a global scale. Implicit within this definition of sustainable development are three core principles: needs; distributive justice (albeit intergenerational); and ability

or power. But what are the needs of present and future generations? Whose needs matter most, and how can those in need – those most deprived – enhance their ability to fulfil their own needs? These concerns underlie much of the pursuit of and have impeded many an attempt to achieve the SDGs (Bowen et al., 2017; Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). This is because those tasked with programme development and implementation of the SDGs faces a complex set of stakeholders with often-conflicting needs and claims to programme benefits. How, then, can programmes towards the achievement of the SDGs more effectively engage with this multitude of stakeholders, to reconcile and fulfil all their needs? In this article, we propose an ethical approach to multistakeholder engagement – an Ethical Salience Framework (ESF) – that effectively foregrounds the needs of those who are most

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vulnerable and who benefit from the achievement of the SDGs. Indeed, the underlying sentiment and objective of the SDGs endure; that is, by foregrounding needs we can and should be able to achieve fairness in the delivery of development outcomes for the world's most vulnerable and deprived communities.

The SDGs have been likened to goal-based institutions characterised by defined targets and objectives (Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018). However, stakeholder theory and its associated stakeholder salience framework assert that there can be no successful achievement of targets and objectives without effective engagement of all relevant stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Jones, 1995; Mitchell et al., 1997). But how are 'effectiveness' and 'relevance' determined? Traditionally, effectiveness refers to the ability to achieve defined objectives, while relevance or materiality is purely instrumental. That is, 'relevant' stakeholders are those with the highest ability, or power, to influence the achievement of organisational objectives (Friedman & Miles, 2002; Mitchell et al., 1997). In the year 2000, Kevin Gibson addressed 'The Moral Basis of Stakeholder Theory', acknowledging that engagement with stakeholders was not only instrumental and an imperative for success, but also a moral responsibility. Indeed, consistent with Jones' (1995) work before him, Gibson (2000:246) asserted that 'there is no necessary discontinuity between self-interest and morality'. Gibson (2000) pointed out three approaches to stakeholder theory: prudence, agency and deontological views, and argued that deontology offers the most promising way to describe the nature and extent of duties to those affected by the firm. Gibson further affirmed that moral behaviour is consistent with rational prudence because people believe that they will be judged for their actions (2000:246). In this article, we also take a normative stakeholder approach, focusing on an ethical approach to understanding both effectiveness and relevance. Consistent with Gibson (2000) own assertion, we concur that deontological views of stakeholder responsibility – 'deontology' comes from the Greek 'obligation' or 'duty' – offer the strongest arguments for such an approach. As an ethical approach, deontology highlights the motives and processes involved in achieving a particular outcome, instead of just the outcome itself. In sum, our arguments for this ethical turn are based on a normative stance that organisations have a duty to engage stakeholders because it is, simply, the right thing to do. Also, achievement of SDGs will remain at risk without having a framework that incorporates deontological fairness with instrumental prudence.

Given both multistakeholder engagement and fulfilment of the needs of the world's most deprived communities, are so important for sustainable development and achievement of SDGs, how can we adapt the existing stakeholder salience framework – (Mitchell et al., 1997) salience framework which is the most cited framework in stakeholder theory (Joos, 2018) – to prioritise those in need? To this end, the Needs- Entitlement-Desert (NED) framework (Dobson, 2003; Gabriel & Bond, 2019; Miller, 1976) offers three criteria for distributive ethics – that is, for allocating resources and recognition among competing stakeholders. The three criteria are need, entitlement and desert. The NED framework prioritises need as primary criterion for distributive ethics, with entitlements and deserts as secondary. Thus, in this article, we apply this ethical framework to stakeholder

theory, with a single overarching question in mind: *Within the context of sustainable development, how might the criteria of needs, entitlement and desert offer a more ethical approach to stakeholder salience?*

At the confluence of the NED framework and Mitchell et al. (1997) framework of stakeholder salience, we derive 'ethical salience'. We borrow from definitions of related but dissimilar concepts such as 'moral salience' (Brown et al., 2016), which defines the moral intensity of a firm's behaviour after it engages in immoral behaviour; and dictionary forms of the term 'ethical salience', which simply describe the moral importance of an issue. Thus, applying, in particular, the latter lexiconic notion to goal-based institutions like the SDGs, we define ethical salience as *the moral importance or magnitude of the claims of stakeholders on an organisation or institution*.

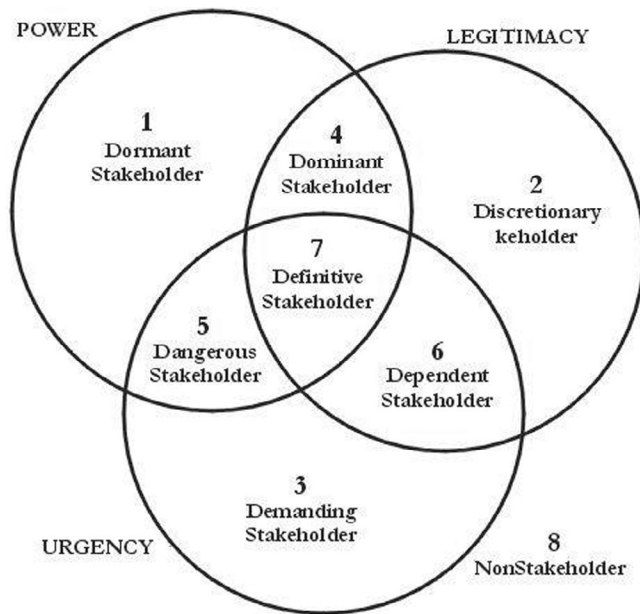
## 2 | THEORETICAL FRAMING

There are two non-descriptive perspectives around the theory of stakeholder salience: an *instrumental* perspective, with emphasis on tactics to attain organisational objectives by managing stakeholders; and a *normative* perspective, which foregrounds moral principles to prescribe 'right or wrong' approaches to managing stakeholders (Friedman & Miles, 2006; Tashman & Raelin, 2013). It is within the latter frame that we align our own arguments. In the context of sustainable development, we propose deontology is the right moral approach for managing deprived stakeholders.

### 2.1 | The instrumental basis for stakeholder salience

The concept of a 'stakeholder' is well-embedded in management theory (Freeman, 1984; Joos, 2018; Miles, 2017; Neville et al., 2011) and presently serves a predominantly instrumental purpose: to achieve organisational and project goals. Indeed, the basic premise is simple: successful organisations recognise and engage effectively with all parties that affect or can be affected by the achievement of the organisation's goals. In fact, Freeman defined the term 'stakeholder' along these lines. One's stakeholders are the individuals or groups that can affect or be affected by the achievement of one's goals and objectives (Freeman, 1984). Simply put, dictionary definitions generally explain the notion of a stakeholder as one who is involved in or affected by any course of action. Thus, to achieve one's objective (an *instrumental* motivation), managers of goal-based institutions or anyone intending to pursue a defined course of action must identify, recognise and acquire the support of the people affected by the planned action.

Many researchers identified and divided stakeholders into typological groups based on their stake in organisational outcomes (e.g., Chang et al. (2011), Brun and Lund (2010), Friedman and Miles (2002), Vos and Achterkamp (2006), Shafique and Gabriel (2022)). These typologies divided stakeholders based on the extent or significance of their effect on (or ability to be affected by a defined course of action). They presented different stakeholder influences as a simple



**FIGURE 1** Mitchell et al.'s stakeholder salience framework (based on Mitchell et al., 1997).

duality between those with significant interests and those with insignificant interests in the course of action. For instance, necessary and contingent stakeholders (Friedman & Miles, 2002), primary and secondary stakeholders (Chang et al., 2011), principal and other stakeholders (Brun & Lund, 2010), internal and external stakeholders (Amaratunga & Haigh, 2011), collaborative and threatening stakeholders (Vos & Achterkamp, 2006), and fiduciary and non-fiduciary stakeholders (Goodpaster Kenneth, 1991). However, (Mitchell et al., 1997) theory of stakeholder salience dug much deeper into the implications of these divisions. They considered: what are the implications of these divisions for the extent to which managers should engage with these stakeholders? To what extent should managers consider the interests of these divided stakeholders? Indeed, stakeholder theory provides guidance not only for the identification and recognition of those affected by a course of action, but also for answering the question, *what responsibility does management have towards these stakeholders?* (Freeman, 1984). A stakeholder's salience is the degree of priority given by managers to the stakeholder's claim (Yang et al., 2014). The stakeholder salience framework is used to ascertain stakeholders' salience or importance to an organisation or course of action (Joos, 2018; Miles, 2017; Wood et al., 2018). The overarching finding suggests that managers bear the primary responsibility towards high salience stakeholders, while demonstrating a relatively low level of accountability towards stakeholders with lower salience (Magness, 2008; Miles, 2017; Mitchell et al., 1997). On this basis, two important critiques of stakeholder salience endure. First, how is the *relevance* and thus, salience of stakeholders determined: specifically, what criteria are used to determine high- versus low-salience stakeholders; and *who* gets to decide? Second, how does one determine the *effectiveness* of one's stakeholder identification and engagement processes?

Though widely contested and dissected, to an extent Mitchell and colleagues provide their own set of criteria to determine stakeholder relevance and salience. Building on the work of Freeman as early as 1984, they suggested three key attributes – power, legitimacy and urgency<sup>1</sup> (see Figure 1) – as essential factors that affect stakeholders' impact on goal-based institutions. Stakeholders are considered high salience if they are perceived to possess all three attributes of power, legitimacy and urgency (see Figure 1). While stakeholders with only one attribute have low levels of salience, those with a combination of any two attributes are perceived as moderately salient. Using their perceived possession of these characteristics as criteria, Mitchell et al. (1997) divided stakeholders into eight different groups: dormant, discretionary, demanding, dominant, dangerous, dependent, and definitive stakeholders, and non-stakeholders (Figure 1).

However, crucially, these three criteria are defined and operationalised only in relation to their relevance to the achievement of goals and objectives. How, then, might the same criteria be applied in contexts where stakeholders have no power or influence over outcomes and/or are unaware of their influence over the achievement of goals and objectives? Recent research has reported many cases where deprived stakeholders, such as communities affected by the disasters were marginalised despite being a direct beneficiary of the proposed post-disaster reconstruction projects (Shafique & Gabriel, 2022). Instrumental approaches to stakeholder salience are inappropriate for the task of addressing the responsibility of organisations to people and groups affected in some dire way by the achievement of objectives. Such approaches are deficient in providing ethical principles for managers to deal with intractable issues involving stakeholders to whom they have moral obligations (Orts & Strudler, 2002). Moreover, the critiques related to *who* decides and how effectiveness is determined are yet to be resolved conclusively within the margins of instrumental interpretations of stakeholder salience theory (Eslerod et al., 2015; Jensen & Sandström, 2011). Therefore, we propose a renewed moral extension of stakeholder salience that includes both instrumentality and morality. Our moral approach is distinctly deontological and addresses both the relevance and effectiveness critiques of solely instrumental approaches to stakeholder salience.

## 2.2 | Towards instrumental-moral coexistence: Why deontology?

We propose a combined instrumental-moral approach is more appropriate for achieving the SDGs than a purely instrumental one. This is because the SDGs are similar to both goal-based international corporations (where an instrumental approach might be appropriate) and local charity associations (where both instrumental and moral approaches might be appropriate) simultaneously. Largely instrumental interpretations of stakeholder salience fail to provide managers with credible ethical principles for fulfilling their obligations to deprived stakeholders (Laplume et al., 2008; Wagner Mainardes et al., 2011). The result is the persistence of a crucial normative issue: *whose* interests should be prioritised (Phillips et al., 2003)? The

sustainable development agenda provides an internationally accepted normative prescription for prioritising individuals and communities who are vulnerable and deprived, and are in need of support to fulfil their basic needs. In addition, while addressing the moral dimensions of stakeholder theory, Gibson (2000) highlighted deontology as the most promising way to describe the extent of organisational and managerial duties to deprived stakeholders. Therefore, with the increasing prevalence of instrumental directives for achievement of SDGs, the article focuses on the formulation and theoretical evaluation of deontological salience. It is imperative to mention that our objective is not to advocate the primacy of one perspective over the other. Instead, our intent is to magnify the ethical dimension in the perception of SDG proponents and, by extension, managers in broader contexts. This enhancement pertains to the equitable consideration of both instrumental and moral factors in the realm of stakeholder decision-making.

Proponents of a moral approach emphasise that all stakeholders have intrinsic value, regardless of their perceived salience by organisational managers. In this sense, some argue that all stakeholders must be treated equally, and organisations should balance their claims without regarding their instrumental value (Gioia, 1999; Phillips, 2003; Shafique, 2022). From a moral perspective, therefore, there is hardly a decision to be made about who the salient stakeholders are; indeed, salient stakeholders just *are*, by virtue of some intrinsic quality or value. Taking a deontological approach to ethical salience emphasises that organisations have a duty to consider all stakeholders possessing these innate qualities. One of the contributions of this article is to practically define and operationalise these intrinsic qualities by borrowing a framework from moral philosophy, designed to distil some of the innate qualities of the human circumstance. In addition to their perceived power, legitimacy or urgency in the eyes of managers, any human fulfilling one or more of these intrinsic criteria should be considered a salient stakeholder.

Therefore, the framework we propose focuses on an ethical approach to addressing both the relevance of deprived stakeholders (using Mitchell et al. (1997) power, legitimacy, urgency framework), and the effectiveness of engaging with these stakeholders (using the need-entitlement-desert framework borrowed from moral philosophy – specifically distributive ethics). In sum, the advantage of this proposed approach to instrumental-moral coexistence is that either approach compensates for the conceptual and practical shortcomings of the other.

### 2.3 | Three criteria for distributive ethics in multistakeholder engagement

There is a collective responsibility for achieving the global SDGs, which means there are different views on who the most important stakeholders are and how their competing interests should be prioritised (see Shafique (2022), Shafique and Gabriel (2022), and Van Tulder and Keen (2018)). There is room therefore for a set of principles that guide and advocate consistency in approaches to allocating

recognition and inclusion rights among SDG programme stakeholders. In this article, we conceptualise recognition and inclusion as benefits to be distributed among stakeholders. We aim to understand how these benefits can be apportioned fairly, especially in the context of vulnerable and deprived stakeholders. However, fairness is decided only subjectively, and in practice, it is based on the different values and ethical criteria used by decision-makers (Agyeman et al., 2002; Dobson, 1998; Miller, 1976). We argue that SDG programme managers might consider the needs, entitlements (rights) and deserts (merits) of each stakeholder before deciding which stakeholders will be prioritised. Consistent with Sen and Foster (1973), Gough (2015), Gabriel and Bond (2019), and with underlying principles of sustainable development (Brundtland, 1987), we position need as the fundamental and principal criterion and hold entitlement and desert<sup>2</sup> as secondary principles.

Our arguments are contingent upon Gabriel and Bond (Gabriel & Bond, 2019) definitions of the three criteria of need, entitlement and desert. 'Need' refers to 'the mental or physical state or circumstance where one perceives a lack of some essential physical, mental or social artefact' (Gabriel & Bond, 2019: 329). Sustainable development stands upon the ethical claim that societies have a duty to help people in need (Brundtland, 1987; Koch et al., 2017; Sen & Foster, 1973). Within this ethical claim, allocation of recognition and inclusion requires that efforts towards realising the SDGs consider and grasp as criterion that the outcomes of these efforts should lead to the fulfilment of needs, and that people in need have a say in decision-making about *how* their needs will be fulfilled. Need generally falls into three categories: instrumental, functional and intrinsic need (Gabriel & Bond, 2019; Miller, 1976). The sustainable development outcomes to which the SDGs aspire cover all three aspects of need.

On one hand, instrumental needs require the use of a tool or device to achieve an end (e.g., needing a hammer to hit a nail). For example, SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) may be perceived as targeting the fulfilment of instrumental needs. Having a means of earning and minimum standard of income is a tool for economic independence or, simply, to afford the things one needs intrinsically to survive. On the other hand, functional needs arise when one is unable to perform one's function or role within society without them (e.g., professors need a doctoral degree to proficiently perform the functions of their role). SDG 4 (Quality Education) highlights an important functional need for those seeking new knowledge to improve their performance of their roles in society's institutions. Similarly, without strong institutions and the notions of peace and justice that underpin them (SDG 16), those tasked with enforcing fairness within our societies may find their efforts ineffective or undermined. Finally, intrinsic or innate needs are basic needs that, if unfulfilled, may reduce the needer's ability to survive (e.g., humans need food and water) (Gabriel & Bond, 2019: 329). SDGs 2 (Zero Hunger) and 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) address intrinsic needs – without food to eat, good health and an overall sense of physical and mental wellness humans cannot survive. In addition, humans are dependent on a thriving natural environment for survival (Raworth, 2017), so the achievement of SDGs 13, 14, and

15 (Climate Action, Life Below Water and Life on Land, respectively) may also be perceived as the fulfilment of some of mankind's own collectively intrinsic needs. Undoubtedly, there exist intricate interdependencies among the three categories of needs. It is conceivable, for example, that quality education, as outlined in SDG 4, not only fulfils a functional requirement for professional and career advancement but also assumes an instrumental role. Indeed, education serves as a conduit out of poverty, aligning with the objectives of SDG 1, and for women, it represents a pathway towards enhanced gender equality in accordance with the aspirations of SDG 5. Furthermore, the provision of clean water and sanitation, as encapsulated in SDG 6, and the accessibility to affordable and clean energy, as articulated in SDG 7, serve as instrumental means to secure the overarching intrinsic objective of ensuring good health and well-being, as specified in SDG 3, for all (intrinsic).

Within the context of multistakeholder engagement for the SDGs, we propose the prioritisation of people's intrinsic needs over their functional and instrumental needs. Unless they can first survive (intrinsic), individuals are unable to play their societal roles effectively (functional) and acquire the artefacts and mechanisms they need to thrive (instrumental). Our argument is that humans' basic needs must be supplied as a priority, before functional and instrumental needs. In the sustainable development context, the intrinsic needs are referred to as basic needs of stakeholders which if remain unfulfilled the ability of stakeholders to survive will reduce (Gabriel & Bond, 2019; Miller, 1976). For instance, provision of basic necessities and safe abode is the intrinsic need of disaster affected communities given their survival is at risk. Thus, we surmise that the stakeholder engagement priority for managers of SDG programmes is to first identify which stakeholders are more intrinsically dependent on the successful realisation of the SDG, then to ensure that such programmes fulfil the intrinsic needs of those stakeholders. Once the intrinsic needs of the most deprived stakeholders are met, programme managers may then turn to consideration of stakeholders' functional and instrumental needs. Needs, we argue, are a primary concern over the ethical criteria of entitlement and desert.

'Entitlement' refers to 'the prerogatives granted to members of societies' (Gabriel & Bond, 2019: 329). In contrast to the concept of 'need', which is positioned as instinctive, entitlement is rather a social construct. It is often punctuated by a dialogue around the rights of the individual (Dobson, 2003; Stumpf et al., 2016), who obtains these rights or prerogatives based on their internationally recognised human rights, for instance, and/or the legal institutions of their own nation state (Gabriel & Bond, 2019). These entitlements include rights to ownership, profits, information, life or free speech, for example. Indeed, entitlement might serve to legitimise needs where managers fail to instinctively recognise and address stakeholders' innate needs (at least, on a basic level, from the perspective of basic human rights). Punctuating the importance of entitlement as criterion, there is one SDG dedicated to upholding human entitlements: SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). Several SDGs uphold the rights and entitlements of heterogeneous groups of stakeholders, including SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 10 (Reduced

Inequalities). However, there is also potential for conflict within each SDG.

One might envision, for instance, a sustainable development project to construct new houses for the poor (SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities). Under the jurisdiction of the nation-state, the contractors hired to build the houses have a right to gain a profit from their work, and the recipients of the houses have a right to an adequate living standard, including housing. The programme managers in charge of implementation must weigh and manage these potentially (though, not necessarily) competing interests carefully. Indeed, substandard housing would allow the contractors to earn profits beyond their entitlements and the rights of the recipients will be compromised. However, entitlements are not purely related to benefits, but are also associated with socially constructed and formalised responsibilities. Indeed, in legal jurisdictions around the world owners of assets and those entitled to profits also have a responsibility to minimise the harm caused by their exploitation of those assets and acquisition of profits. Thus, by the combined principles of need and entitlement, the intrinsic needs of housing recipients should be prioritised over the instrumental needs and/or entitlements (i.e., profits) of the contractors. This is not to say the contractors should not make a profit. Instead, the profits (entitlements) should not be acquired at the expense of the innate needs of recipients. Indeed, if recipients' intrinsic needs remain unmet, then the programme has not achieved sustainable development.

Finally, 'desert' focuses on the morality or merits of the previous efforts and actions of individuals. It refers to 'the benefits and harms accrued because of one's efforts' (Gabriel & Bond, 2019: 329). As a criterion for fairness, desert suggests that benefits<sup>3</sup> (in this article, stakeholder recognition and inclusion) should be given to those individuals and groups who most deserve it. That is, those whose previous actions warrant a perception of worthiness to be recognised and included in decision-making. When these principles are formalised into law, there may be considerable overlap between desert and entitlement. In addition, it is important to emphasise that deserts cannot normally serve as an ethical criterion independently of need and entitlement. For instance, the implication of desert for the engagement of multiple stakeholders towards the SDGs is that it draws attention to not only the current claims and interests of each stakeholder, but also their previous claims and actions, especially as they relate to specific aspects of sustainable development. For instance, programmes focused on climate action (SDG 13) may consider the previous claims and actions of environmental activists and communities negatively affected by climate change, as well as those accused of polluting the natural environment. Relying solely on desert as an ethical criterion might suggest that SDG 13 programmes engage solely with activists and affected communities, as their previous actions may warrant more benefits than polluters. However, the stakeholder most intrinsically reliant on the programme's success is the affected community. If the community's need for a thriving natural environment is considered first, as a priority before the consideration of deserts, then the polluters should also be recognised and included in stakeholder dialogue as their actions most infringe on the ability of the community to meet

their needs for survival. Nonetheless, the important aspect of desert for stakeholder engagement is that individuals and groups who have historically made a positive impact on the issue should be included to extend knowledge transfer and the impact of all stakeholders.

## 2.4 | Ethical multistakeholder engagement and the SDGs

The SDGs themselves aspire to fairer outcomes for all. However, it is also worth examining the fairness of the processes and approaches used to achieve these outcomes (that is, the *means* in addition to the ends), to ensure all relevant stakeholders' concerns are considered in managerial decision-making. Several scholars advocate a more fair and inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement towards the achievement of the global SDGs. For instance, while some advocate for the use of wisdom in the identification and appraisal of stakeholder salience (Bryson, 2004), others identify a lack of inclusive decision-making among heterogeneous stakeholders and a need to focus on 'making difficult trade-offs, focusing on equity, justice and fairness' as core challenges to implementing the SDGs (Bowen et al. (2017): 90). Indeed, as goal-based institutions, achieving the targets of the SDGs has proved a complex undertaking as global consensus suggests that realising the SDGs requires the engagement of multiple stakeholders over complex timeframes and geographical scales (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018; Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018). Achieving the SDGs themselves is often classed as a wicked problem (Van Tulder & Keen, 2018) because of their complexity and the inherent interrelatedness among them. Therefore, the successful realisation of the global sustainable development agenda relies considerably on fairness in stakeholder engagement and the management of their often competing claims.

Stakeholder engagement is defined as undertaking practices that involve stakeholders in a positive manner in organisational activities (Greenwood, 2007; Noland & Phillips, 2010). Recently, stakeholder engagement has emerged as a solution to many social, cultural, political, development and environmental issues (Blackburn et al., 2018). The corpus of stakeholder theory often uses the terms 'stakeholder engagement' and 'stakeholder participation' interchangeably, to describe the involvement of stakeholders in an activity of their interest (Eskerod et al., 2015; Mojtahedi & Oo, 2017). Partnership and stakeholder engagement are explicitly important for sustainable development (SDG 17 – Partnerships for the Goals). However, where sustainable development is concerned, it is often difficult to draw a boundary around the interests of all stakeholders and manage them neatly (Vos & Achterkamp, 2006; Yang et al., 2009). Stakeholders often have complicated and competing interests, and is themselves notoriously heterogeneous and complex. Stakeholders' interests are influenced by their personal preferences, roles and several economic, cultural, and political factors (Barnett, 2007). For instance, in an infrastructure development project context, various stakeholders hold diverse priorities and often competing interests. Project beneficiaries typically emphasise the timely completion of the project while

focusing on the satisfaction of their needs and preferences. Contractors, on the other hand, often interested in optimising their profits, and civil engineering experts prioritise the construction of infrastructure that is not only secure but also of exceptional quality. Likewise, donors and government agencies tend to exercise prudence regarding the project's cost implications. Given this diversity of stakeholder objectives, it is unlikely that the project will comprehensively meet the interests of all parties involved. Hence, it becomes paramount to comprehensively comprehend the demands and assertions of each stakeholder, subsequently harmonising them with the overarching project objectives.

Stakeholder engagement ensures that people have a direct voice in decision-making that affects their lives. The United Nations affirmed public engagement as a comprehensive process that aims to maintain the well-being of the public at large (UNDP, 2016). The involvement of people in political system is insufficient, but engagement in the decision-making regarding the issues that involve public interests is broadly regarded as a matter of fundamental human rights (Daley & Marsiglia, 2000; UNDP, 2000). Engagement in decision-making concerning their interests allows for the co-creation of ideologies and discourses constituting shared understandings. Active, free and meaningful engagement of the public ensures the logical development and fair distribution of the benefits resulting therefrom (Bouraoui & Lizarralde, 2013; Simonsen & Robbins, 2018).

Still, the capacity of the goals to solve crucial development challenges for those most vulnerable relies on our ability to prioritise their needs, even among a complex web of stakeholders, and represent their interests in decision-making for the goals. One of the foundational benefits of the SDGs is the fulfilment of the needs of vulnerable people and communities and, indeed, we have a duty or obligation to help those in need (Miller, 1976; Sen & Foster, 1973). This deontological claim resonates across several traditions that exude a sense of human solidarity towards the deprived. Religious, legal and scholarly traditions generally agree that pursuing the fulfilment of the innate needs of all people is a virtuous and worthwhile endeavour (Miller, 1976; Sen & Foster, 1973). There is consensus, therefore, that helping those who are deprived and in need is the 'right' thing to do – even for goal-based institutions.

## 3 | ETHICAL SALIENCE OF DEPRIVED STAKEHOLDERS: ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLES

Uniting these perspectives towards a concept of ethical salience warrants returning to the core of mainstream stakeholder theory and the concept of a 'stake'. As Carroll Archie and Buchholtz (Carroll Archie & Buchholtz, 1993:57) once put it: 'A stake is an interest or share in an undertaking ... A stake is also a claim. A claim is an assertion to a title or a *right* to something'. As goal-based institutions (Van Zanten & Van Tulder, 2018), managers of SDG programmes have a duty not to infringe on the rights of stakeholders. Therefore, within the context of sustainable development, managers of SDG programmes might consider two categories of ethically salient stakeholders: (1) those with an

expressed claim or right to the fulfilment of their needs and wants; and (2) those whose claims or rights remain unexpressed, unacknowledged and/or unfulfilled. In the former case, stakeholders who express their claim to needs and wants (legitimacy, urgency) and demand the fulfilment of their rights (power) are contemporarily considered high-salience stakeholders. After all, using the existing stakeholder salience framework outside of sustainable development contexts usually points to stakeholders who possess all three attributes and all three ethical criteria to be considered most salient (see the bottom right corner of Table 1).

However, in the latter case, stakeholders whose rights to fulfil their needs and wants remain unexpressed, unacknowledged (lack of legitimacy) and unfulfilled (lack of power) may be considered low-salience stakeholders. By juxtaposing stakeholders' needs and wants with their stakeholder attributes, we consider this latter category as 'deprived' stakeholders instead (see the upper left corner of Table 1). These stakeholders are not only deprived of basic rights, but also experience deprivation in the unfulfillment of their basic needs. This unfulfillment of deprived stakeholders' basic needs raises concerns for their survival (urgency) – a concern that managers of SDG programmes have a duty to address. Indeed, a truly ethical turn on stakeholder theory requires recognition, consideration and inclusion of even those most deprived stakeholders whose innate needs must be fulfilled as a priority, but who are without access to the implements of power (e.g., inclusion) and legitimacy (e.g., recognition). Thus, taking a deontological approach to stakeholder salience and sustainable development, we propose this second category of deprived stakeholders in the upper left corner of Table 1 may constitute an alternate group of high-salience stakeholders. We support our arguments by drawing on the instances from the post-disaster recovery initiatives initiated in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. These endeavours were initiated and often managed by international donor agencies and development organisations. For simplicity, we have focused on the fallout from this single event as the context for our illustrations. While this context may indeed seem too narrow for application of our precepts in other and wider contexts, we emphasise that our intention is for the examples and instantiations presented to be purely illustrative, not representative. In this way, we surmise, we establish at least a basic applicability to circumstances of sustainable development.

We propose that stakeholder deprivation is a state of being, caused by a combination of non-fulfilment of needs, and a lack of both perceived and tangible power and legitimacy. In fact, we surmise that individuals and communities perceived as most vulnerable or deprived within sustainable development contexts often possess one attribute in common: *urgency*. For example, consider the case of India's Shelter Reconstruction Programme. The goal of this programme was to provide permanent housing to those communities affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami in the Nagapattinam district of Tamil Nadu, India. Yet, by several accounts, the affected communities were considered simply as beneficiaries, in need of relief and new homes (need; urgency) (Jordan et al., 2015). These communities played no active role in the processes and decision-making involved in constructing their new homes (lack of power and legitimacy) and were

simply given the new housing facilities at the completion of construction. The communities' rights to inclusion were seemingly ignored by the government who provided land and basic infrastructure and the NGOs and development programme managers who were responsible for reconstruction. At the conclusion of the project, the communities in need reported the poor quality of construction, as well as lack of water supply, sanitation and drainage systems for most project locations (Jordan et al., 2015). Reportedly, both the outcome and construction processes also negatively affected the livelihoods of the communities. Instrumentally, the project was a success – indeed, new houses were constructed, and all high salience stakeholders were involved (lower right portions of Table 1). From a deontological perspective however, one may consider the government and project managers to have neglected their duties to the deprived communities of Tamil Nadu who were in urgent need of quality housing (upper left portions of Table 1).

However, deprived stakeholders who are vocal about the non-fulfilment of their needs may in time also acquire legitimacy through their involvement in programme activities and the impartial acknowledgement or recognition of their claims and concerns by programme managers. In the aftermath of the same 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, members of affected communities in Indonesia lived in temporary shelters in a humid and rainy climate. The deprived communities were therefore encouraged to contribute to the labour of constructing their new homes, to facilitate the timely and satisfactory completion of the project (need; urgency and legitimacy) (Lambert, & Maisonneuve, d., 2007; Ophiyandri et al., 2010). While the communities were recognised as stakeholders and thus included in construction activities (i.e., they possessed legitimacy), they had no control over the project's resources and made no contributions to decision-making (i.e., lack of power). As a result, the communities were still dissatisfied with their new homes and eventually abandoned the houses (Ophiyandri et al., 2010). Thus, the abandonment of the houses suggests the project was neither an instrumental nor deontological success (compare the upper left and lower right portions of Table 1), as project contributors and managers failed to meet their own objectives and failed to fulfil their duties to the deprived communities.

Yet, deprived stakeholders themselves may in time acquire power by vocalising their concerns to the target institution. Indeed, even when experiencing vulnerability, vocal stakeholders can have influence over organisations and their outcomes. Another development project in response to the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, in four islands in Maldives, may be used as an example. The project was initiated and managed by the British Red Cross Society (BRCS) and illustrates how even for vulnerable communities in need or urgent housing, even a small variation in control over decision-making can enhance results (Lawther, 2009). In the first geographical phase of the project, the affected communities were given control over the selection of the floor plan for their houses, as well as choice of colour of internal and external paint, and roof and floor tiles. In the second phase, the communities were not only involved in implementation. They were given specific responsibilities in the pre-construction phases and made decisions about the design of their houses and communities, they

TABLE 1 Combining distributive ethics and stakeholder salience.

	Need	Entitlement	Desert	Need + entitlement	Need + desert	Entitlement + desert	Need + entitlement + desert
Urgency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program beneficiary with time-sensitive needs- fulfilling demands.</li> <li>Deprived stakeholder with time-sensitive needs- fulfilling demands.</li> </ul>	Stakeholder with claim to beneficiary rights and time-sensitive demands	Stakeholder with time-sensitive demands and claims to be deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder with claim to needs-fulfilling beneficiary rights and time-sensitive demands	Stakeholder with time-sensitive demands and claims to be deserving of needs-fulfilling program benefits	Stakeholder with time-sensitive demands, claims to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands and a claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits
Legitimacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Impartially recognised program beneficiary.</li> <li>Deprived stakeholder with impartially recognised needs-fulfilling demands.</li> </ul>	Stakeholder impartially recognised as having the rights of a beneficiary	Stakeholder impartially recognised as deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder impartially recognised as having needs-fulfilling beneficiary rights	Stakeholders impartially recognised as deserving of needs-fulfilling program benefits	Stakeholder impartially recognised as having beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder impartially recognised as having a claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of needs-fulfilling program benefits
Power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Program beneficiary in control of resources and decision-making.</li> <li>Deprived but influential stakeholder with needs- fulfilling demands.</li> </ul>	Influential stakeholder with claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder claims to be deserving of program benefits with control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with needs-fulfilling claim to beneficiary rights and/or control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with claim to be deserving of needs-fulfilling program benefits and/or control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with claim to beneficiary rights, deserving of program benefits and/or control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with claim to beneficiary rights, deserving of needs-fulfilling program benefits and/or control over resources and decision-making
Legitimacy + Urgency	Stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands	Stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive demands and a claim to beneficiary rights	Stakeholder with time-sensitive claims to be deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands and a claim to beneficiary rights	Stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands and deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits	Stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits
Power + Urgency	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive needs- fulfilling demands and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive claims to be deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making
Power + Legitimacy	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised needs-fulfilling demands and	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised demands, a claim to beneficiary	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised claims to be deserving of	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised needs-fulfilling demands, a	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised needs-fulfilling demands,	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised demands, a claim to beneficiary	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised needs-fulfilling demands, a



TABLE 1 (Continued)

	Need	Entitlement	Desert	Need + entitlement	Need + desert	Entitlement + desert	Need + entitlement + desert
Urgency + Legitimacy + Power	control over resources and decision-making	rights and control over resources and decision-making	program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	rights and deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making
	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive claim to be deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, deserving of program benefits, resources control and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making	Influential stakeholder with impartially recognised time-sensitive needs-fulfilling demands, a claim to beneficiary rights and deserving of program benefits and control over resources and decision-making

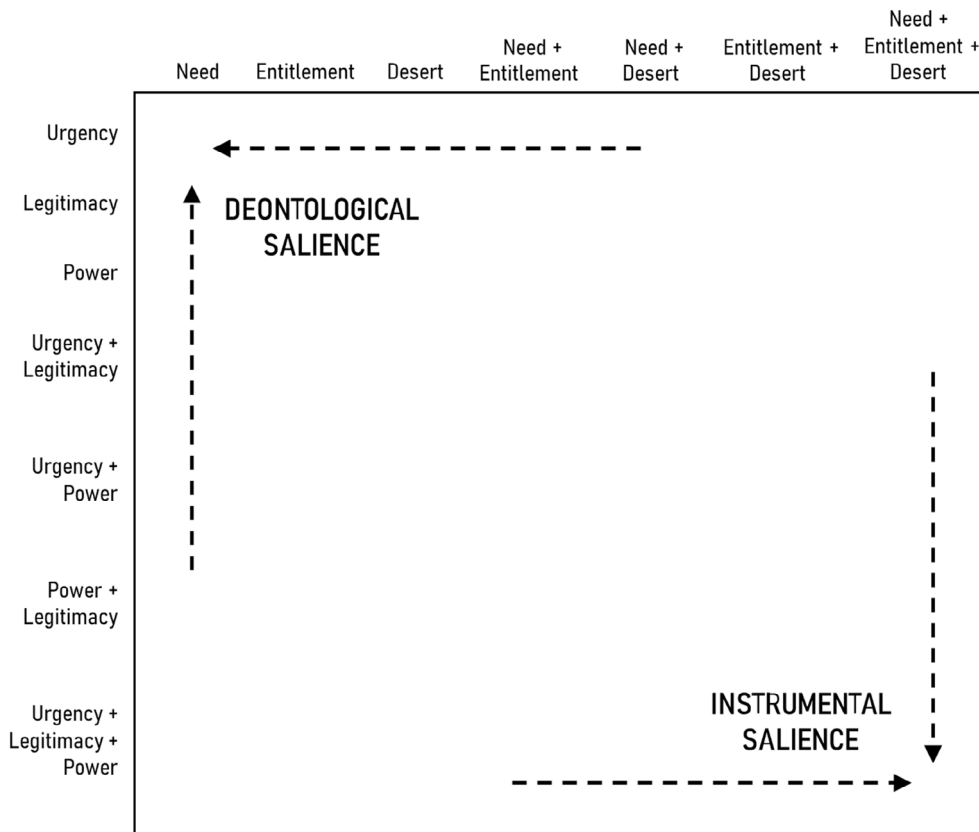
supervised the construction process and were involved in finishing and colour selection for paints and tiles (Lawther, 2009). Satisfaction surveys for both phases showed that communities who benefitted from the second phase of the project were more satisfied and more likely to stay in their newly constructed homes. In the second phase, the affected communities were identified and included as high-salience stakeholders, reflecting not only their need and the urgency of their claims, but also the power and legitimacy attributed to them. The community's involvement also reduced the project's overall operating costs and saved time to completion. In this case, the project may be considered successful, both instrumentally (the BRCS achieved its objectives) and deontologically (the BRCS fulfilled its duties to deprived communities). Thus, we surmise that, upon acquisition of power, the neediness of deprived stakeholders becomes irrelevant. The ability to influence decision-making towards the fulfilment of their own basic needs compels managers to fulfil their duties to deprived stakeholders (upper left portions of Table 1). In addition, the ability to acquire influence to supply one's own basic needs also constitutes, arguably, one of the fundamental tenets of the pursuit of sustainable development.

#### 4 | A NEW FRAMEWORK OF ETHICAL SALIENCE

Thus, we propose and advocate an extended two-pronged approach to stakeholder salience – an *Ethical Salience Framework (ESF)* (see Figure 2). The ESF is a framework to identify and prioritise engagement with stakeholders of SDG programmes, based on the intensity or magnitude of their stake in achieving the SDG. The proposed ESF suggests two clusters of crucial salience: (1) a *deontological cluster*, with perceived salience motivated by an intrinsic sense of duty or obligation to those in need; and (2) an *instrumental cluster*, with perceived salience motivated by the pursuit of institutional self-interest (Figure 2). This framework provides a much-needed ethical extension and enhancement of the existing approach to stakeholder salience. First, it foregrounds the recognition rights of those stakeholders whose innate needs require urgent attention. Second, the framework distils the innate and instrumental needs of different kinds of beneficiaries. Together, these constitute the apparent benefits of extending salience towards a deontological cluster. Third, the proposed ESF promotes a more objective approach to salience, by externalising loci for processes of stakeholder identification. Externalising loci of stakeholder identification has potential to enhance the rigour of more traditional approaches to instrumental salience and addresses a major critique of extant stakeholder theory – that is, it fails to specify who, exactly, decides stakeholders' salience.

Extending notions of salience towards deontological considerations provides a framework to solve specific challenges in the pursuit of the sustainable development agenda. For instance, the ESF enforces the recognition rights of stakeholders whose innate needs are tied to SDG programme outcomes. The underlying ethical tenet is simple: no one should be deprived of their basic (innate) needs.

**FIGURE 2** A proposed ethical salience framework (ESF).



Indeed, this core principle underscores the work of the United Nations' global sustainable development agenda, as the very basis of the pursuit of sustainable development is to enhance the lives and livelihoods of individuals and communities that need it most. Therefore, in the most basic of interpretations, the proposed ESF has potential to elevate this principle from an innately normative anecdote to an established ethical principle for the recognition of salient stakeholders by goal-based institutions.

However, the proposed ESF could also serve to simplify a few grey areas that previously obscured the pursuit of sustainable development. For instance, by distinguishing between the innate needs and instrumental and functional needs of different kinds of beneficiaries, the ESF is a reminder that not all needs are equal. In the upper left corner of Table 1, we distinguish between these innate needs of deprived individual stakeholders, and those programme beneficiaries whose needs may potentially only be instrumental (such as profit-needing corporations). In addition, beyond the problematisation of individual and communal needs, we suggest that the proposed ESF also offers potential to clarify and distinguish the innate needs of different kinds of enterprises. From this perspective, the ESF may have broader implications and applicability beyond sustainable development contexts. For instance, the framework may be useful to enterprises with more socially oriented structures and/or founding values. Not for profit organisations, for example, may find the ESF useful to help them identify key beneficiaries and design and prioritise programming to address their beneficiaries' needs. Indeed, while profitability may be considered an innate need of profit-seeking

corporations (that is, without profits such corporations will not survive), non-profit organisations may consider the fulfilment of the needs of their beneficiaries the ultimate determinant of their survival. While existing stakeholder typologies and divisions are instrumentally motivated, characterising stakeholders based on their influence on organisational outcomes, the proposed ESF offers an ethical basis on which to distinguish between stakeholders and their claims on organisations.

Finally, the ESF promotes a more objective approach to salience, by externalising loci for processes of stakeholder identification and salience. Under the existing framework, stakeholder salience is appraised subjectively by organisational or programme managers. However, the ESF takes a more objective approach incorporating both managerial perceptions (of urgency, legitimacy and power) and perceptions inherent within extant societal structures and norms (that is, entitlements, deserts and needs). In particular, the criteria of entitlement and desert are both externally appraised by societal legal infrastructures (entitlement) and rules and values that govern the 'right' way to behave under certain circumstances. Indeed, they are 'socially constructed criteria that reflect society's institutionalised acknowledgement of the rights, wants, preferences and efforts of its members' (Gabriel & Bond, 2019: 329). This enhances the fairness of stakeholder identification and salience determination processes, as it allows for determinations of stakeholder relevance by institutions outside the organisation itself to be considered in internal managerial deliberations over stakeholder salience.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the proposed ESF combines deontological fairness with instrumental prudence to propose a two-pronged approach to stakeholder salience. On one hand, the more ethical and salience criteria a stakeholder fulfils, the more instrumental salience the stakeholder possesses. On the other hand, the fewer of these criteria possessed, the more deontological salience the stakeholder possesses. The deontological basis for the latter salience cluster is that organisations of all kinds have a duty to do the right thing, not only by legal standards but also by the normative values to which they are likely to be held accountable in society. Thus, it is crucial to emphasise that under the proposed ESF, both categories of stakeholders would be considered *equally* ethically salient. The framework, we propose, serves to enhance the perceived salience of deprived stakeholders compared to other more powerful and easily recognised stakeholders. Indeed, the framework proposes that simply *doing the right thing* is an adequate basis for including and engaging those in need. Also, the proposed framework provides sustainability managers a solid ethical foundation for understanding, endorsing, and actively pursuing sustainable development.

While the new model was derived based on lessons and values consistent with sustainable development, we suggest that the ESF can and should also be applied in non-sustainable development contexts as well. After all, do all managers not have a duty or obligation to ensure fulfilment of the needs and upholding of the rights of their employees and communities affected by their operations? By formalising these obligations in combination with traditional managerial obligations to legitimate and powerful stakeholders, we offer a more holistic interpretation and framing of stakeholder salience. In sum, this framework offers a new dimension of theory with potential of further extension and application beyond sustainable development context, sustainability practitioners may utilise this to ensure fulfilment of vulnerable stakeholders' needs and SDGs.

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### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Power is described as 'a relationship among social actors in which one social actor, A, can get another social actor, B, to do something that B would not have otherwise done' (Mitchell et al., 1997: 865). Power refers to the ability of a stakeholder to sway decision-making and control resources and actions (Magness, 2008). Legitimacy is a generalised perception or assumption that the behaviour and actions of any stakeholder are perceived as desirable or appropriate by the organisation (Mitchell et al., 1997). Stakeholders are considered legitimate if their claims are recognised as congruent within the organisation's ethical and social context (Magness, 2008; Phillips, 2003) – that is, if there is consensus that the stakeholder's claims are material to the achievement of objectives. Urgency is a pressing call for attention (Magness, 2008;

Mitchell et al., 1997). An urgent situation means that a delay in response could cause significant damage to stakeholders or compromise the achievement of organisational objectives. Urgency, therefore, refers to the time sensitivity of a stakeholder's claims (Parent and Deephouse, 2007; Chandrasekhar, 2012).

- <sup>2</sup> We believe at this point it is important to comment upon and provide clarity about our use of the word 'desert'. Indeed, some readers might confuse our philosophical appropriation of the word with its more common usage in everyday parlance to describe a barren landscape or as a synonym of the verb 'to abandon'. However, in this paper we rather use the word 'desert' in its standard philosophical sense to describe *both* the extent to which a person (the 'deserver') deserves some outcome (i.e., their 'deserts') – good or bad – *and* the basis upon which said person's 'deserts' is determined. For further reference, the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* provides a comprehensive explanation of the concept: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/desert/>.
- <sup>3</sup> Desert also refers to the harms or negative consequences given to those individuals and groups whose previous actions are perceived as unacceptable or morally wrong. Indeed, one might be familiar with the claim that 'the punishment must fit the crime'. However, we do not address this aspect of deserts in this article because we focus on stakeholders' recognition and inclusion in engagement, rather than stakeholder exclusion.

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