

A69: Exploring Stakeholder Engagement in Times of Controversy

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Abstract. This case study examines the controversial A69 motorway project—a 53 km toll road between Castres and Toulouse, in France—designed to boost regional connectivity and economic growth. Despite being declared a public utility, the project faced escalating resistance from local officials, environmental groups, and civil society, who criticized its environmental impact, lack of transparency, and questionable public interest. Allegations of opaque financing and lobbying by key stakeholders intensified scrutiny. Civil resistance included protests, hunger strikes, and legal actions. In 2025 a court of law ruled the project illegal due to the absence of an overriding public need, halting construction. This ongoing case, now under appeal, highlights broader tensions between economic development, environmental sustainability, and democratic accountability in large infrastructure projects. It offers students the possibility of exploring CSR from a broader perspective, allowing them to critically analyze a real-world situation.

Keywords: corporate social responsibility, stakeholder dialogue, environmental ethics, sustainability, controversy.

1. Public Utility and Mobility Law: A Project Supported by the State

In 2010, public authorities decided to build the A69, a private toll motorway of 53km between Castres and Toulouse, in the Southwest of France, that would pass through and next to 24 small cities. Scheduled for completion by the end of 2025, its estimated cost was €450 million, of which €23 million would come from public sources (1)¹.

Following a public inquiry and planning phase, the A69 was declared to be of “general interest” on December 22, 2017, through a Declaration of Public Utility (Fr.: *Déclaration d’Utilité Publique* or DUP), issued by the French State. The DUP is a legal measure in France that allows projects deemed beneficial to the broader public or national interest to proceed, even if they involve significant

1. Numbers in brackets refer to “Links to press articles” at the end of the document.

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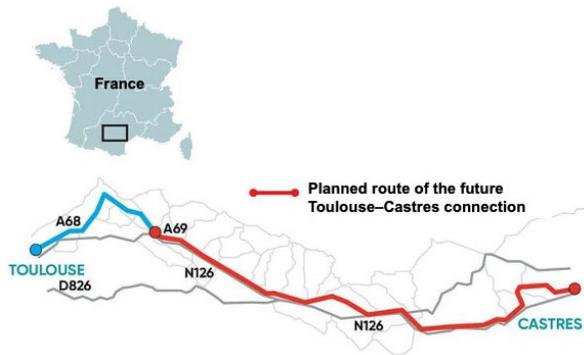
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land-use modifications or face public opposition. From that perspective, the A69 project was in line with national goals to improve connectivity between urban and rural areas, being supported by many political representatives of the State, notably local authorities such as the President of the Occitanic Region, the Prefect of the Tarn Department, as well as local elected representatives (2). The latter argued that the A69 would enhance connectivity between the cities of Castres and Mazamet, contributing to regional development by providing a high-speed connection to Toulouse's economic hub. That would boost industrial development and employment in the area, where were merely 49 000 existing local jobs for 132 000 inhabitants (3). It would also reduce the driving time by approximately 35 minutes, improve road safety, and reduce traffic jams while increasing the attractiveness of rural areas. Besides, according to its supporters, the motorway would save time and lives, since transportation to medical facilities would be faster in the event of medical emergencies.

Figure 1: Geographic context of the A69 motorway project



Source: adapted from “Le Pelérin”²

Box 1: Why not a referendum?

In controversial cases, the French government may organize a referendum, as it was the case for another debated infrastructure project: the Notre-Dame-des-Landes airport, which aimed to build a major international airport near Nantes, in France. The project faced strong opposition due to its impact on 1 700 hectares of wetlands and farmland. Despite a local referendum in 2016 approving the project, protests and legal challenges continued, and in 2018 the French government officially abandoned it. In the case of the A69, no referendum was proposed, as the government was aware that 61% of the public concerned by the project^a was in favor of the construction.

a. Ifop (October 19, 2023): <https://www.ifop.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/120365-Rapport.pdf>

2. Le Pelérin (2023, October 21). *Pourquoi le projet de l'autoroute A69 entre Toulouse et Castres fait polémique*. Retrieved July 25, 2025, from <https://www.lepelerin.com/france/societe/pourquoi-le-projet-de-l-autoroute-a69-entre-toulouse-et-castres-fait-polemique-8361>