

Advances in Organizational Leadership

(Perspectives from African Scholars)

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Pan Africa
Christian University

Advances in Organizational Leadership

(Perspectives from African Scholars)

Volume 1

ADVANCES IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP
VOLUME 1

**ADVANCES IN ORGANIZATIONAL
LEADERSHIP**

(Perspectives from African Scholars)

EDITED BY

GILBERT A. ANG'ANA, PHD

School of Leadership, Business and Technology
Pan Africa Christian University



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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

<i>Gilbert Atuto Ang'ana:</i>	School of Leadership, Business, and Technology, Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.
<i>Theresia Mueni Mutetei:</i>	Department of Business Studies, Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.
<i>Solomon Munyao:</i>	Department of Leadership Studies, Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.
<i>Wilson Odiyo:</i>	Department of Leadership Studies, Pan Africa Christian University, Nairobi, Kenya.

PREFACE

Leadership today is being exercised in organizational environments characterized by complexity, uncertainty, rapid technological change, shifting stakeholder expectations, and growing demands for ethical and responsible practice. Against this backdrop, *Advances in Organizational Leadership* brings together contemporary perspectives, insights, and evidence that contribute to a deeper understanding of how leadership is evolving and how organizations can respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. The purpose of this volume is to provide a timely and multidimensional exploration of organizational leadership bridging theory, research, and practice. It seeks to move beyond current scholarship in leadership and instead considers leadership as a dynamic organizational concept. The volume therefore engages with emerging ideas, practices, and debates that are reshaping leadership across organizations and sectors, with particular attention to the realities of contemporary organizations and the contexts in which leadership is exercised.

The volume is intended for a diverse audience. It will be useful to scholars and researchers of leadership and management, post-graduate and doctoral students, organizational practitioners, executives, human resource professionals, consultants, policy-makers, and leaders seeking to reflect critically on their own leadership practice. It is also designed to serve as a resource for academic and executive education, while providing practitioners with perspectives that can inform organizational decision-making and leadership development. Additionally, the volume brings

together a collection of focused chapters, each addressing a significant dimension, emerging issue, or contemporary debate in organizational leadership. The chapters combine conceptual reflection, empirical evidence, critical analysis, and practical implications, allowing the reader to engage with organizational leadership from multiple perspectives. Rather than presenting a single prescriptive model of leadership, the volume offers a plurality of approaches that recognize the diversity of organizations, leaders, followers, and contexts.

Volume 1, Part I explores the conceptual perspectives on advancing organizational leadership. The four chapters in this volume are distinct in their questions and approaches, but they illustrate the movement from leadership as an individual and relational phenomenon towards leadership as a strategic, dynamic capability, and change-enabling organizational process. The first chapter, “Collaborative Leadership Reimagined: A Research Agenda for an Integrative Aesthetic Model,” takes collaboration beyond the familiar language of teamwork and participation. Its contribution is to invite a deeper reconsideration of how collaborative leadership can be understood and studied. By proposing an integrative aesthetic perspective, the chapter opens space for considering leadership not just as a set of observable behaviours or formal structures, but also as an embodied, relational and interpretive process. It consequently provides a research agenda for scholars interested in understanding how collaboration is experienced, constructed and sustained within organizational life.

The second chapter, “*The missing link in the implementation and sustainability of innovative technology and change initiatives in African health systems: collaborative leadership*,” brings the discussion directly into the arena of organizational change and innovation. Technology does not transform organizations simply

because it is introduced. Sustainable transformation depends on people, relationships, leadership, organizational culture, institutional capacity and the ability to translate innovation into everyday practice. This is particularly significant in health systems, where technological and organizational innovations intersect with professional identities, institutional structures, resource limitations and the needs of communities. The chapter consequently examines collaborative leadership as a potential mechanism through which innovation and change can move from implementation to sustainability.

The third chapter, *“Strategic Leadership in Africa: Advances, Practices, and Global Perspectives,”* moves the conversation from collaboration towards strategic direction and organizational positioning. Strategic leadership requires organizations to interpret their environments, anticipate change, allocate resources, build capabilities and align present decisions with future possibilities. In African contexts, these responsibilities are exercised amid distinctive institutional, economic and socio-cultural realities while organizations simultaneously participate in increasingly globalized systems. The chapter therefore places strategic leadership in Africa’s conversation with broader global debates, asking what can be learned from African perspectives and what African organizational experiences can contribute to the international strategic leadership literature.

The fourth chapter, *“Beyond Compliance towards Strategic Stewardship: Redesigning Corporate Governance for Sustainable Value Creation in African Corporations,”* extends the leadership conversation into governance. Corporate governance has often been approached through the lens of compliance, control, accountability and protection of stakeholder interests. These remain essential. However, contemporary organizations increasingly face

the challenge of creating sustainable value while maintaining legitimacy, accountability and long-term stakeholder trust. This chapter therefore asks whether governance can move beyond a predominantly compliance-oriented logic towards a more strategic conception of stewardship. Such a shift is particularly pertinent in Africa, where questions of institutional trust, responsible resource use, sustainability, accountability and stakeholder relationships remain central to organizational legitimacy and development. Scholarship on African corporate governance has similarly explored the potential contribution of African ontological perspectives such as Ubuntu to stakeholder-centred and humanistic governance.

These chapters provide a broad but connected view of organizational leadership. *Collaboration asks how leadership is collectively produced; strategic leadership asks where organizations are going and how they navigate complexity; strategic stewardship asks what organizations are responsible for and how they create sustainable value; and collaborative change leadership asks how organizations translate innovation into sustained practice.* One of the central arguments running through this volume is that organizational leadership must increasingly be understood at multiple levels.

- At the *individual level*, leaders require judgement, integrity, self-awareness, strategic thinking and the capacity to influence.
- At the *relational level*, leadership involves trust, communication, collaboration, participation and the ability to mobilize diverse perspectives.
- At the *organizational level*, leadership concerns strategy, structures, culture, governance, learning, innovation and organizational capabilities.

- At the *ecosystem level*, leadership involves partnerships, networks, communities, institutions, regulators, technology providers and other stakeholders whose actions influence organizational outcomes.

This multi-level understanding is consistent with the broader movement in leadership scholarship away from exclusively leader-centred explanations. Complexity leadership theory, for instance, emphasizes the interaction between formal administrative structures and emergent dynamics that enable adaptation, creativity and learning. For African organizations, this systems perspective is particularly relevant. Organizations frequently operate within environments where formal institutions, informal networks, communities, political and regulatory systems, cultural expectations and resource realities intersect. Organizational leadership must therefore be capable of navigating not only internal organizational dynamics but also the wider systems within which organizational legitimacy and performance are constructed.

Gilbert A. Ang'ana, PhD

Editor

INTRODUCTION

ADVANCES IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Gilbert A. Ang'ana

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Organizations today are operating in an environment that is more complex, interconnected and uncertain. Technological disruption, changing expectations of employees and stakeholders, demographic shifts, climate and sustainability pressures, public accountability, geopolitical uncertainty and the growing demand for ethical and responsible business are reshaping what organizations must accomplish and, consequently, what leadership within organizations must become (Rashed et al., 2025; Zu, 2023). The leadership question is therefore no longer simply *Who is the leader?* or *What does the leader do?* It is increasingly about *how leadership is distributed, how collective action is mobilized, how organizations adapt, how decisions create value for multiple stakeholders, and how leadership remains credible and legitimate in changing contexts.*

This shift has significant implications for organizational leadership scholarship and practice. Most leadership approaches often concentrated attention on the individual leader: the leader's traits, behaviours, competencies, style, charisma or capacity to influence followers (Bakker et al., 2023; Meirinhos, 2023). These perspectives have generated important insights and remain relevant. Yet contemporary organizations increasingly operate as complex systems in which outcomes are rarely attributable to one individual alone. Leadership can emerge through interactions among people, teams, structures, technologies, institutions and external stakeholders. Complexity leadership scholarship, for example, conceptualizes leadership as a dynamic and interactive process capable of generating learning, innovation and adaptation within complex organizational systems (Enang et al., 2025; Espejo-Pereda et al., 2025). Similarly, research on organizational effectiveness demonstrates that leadership operates through multiple mechanisms, including adaptation, efficiency, human capital and coordinated organizational action, rather than through the actions of a single heroic executive (Park et al., 2025; Sott & Bender, 2025). It is within this dynamic organizational landscape that this e-book, *Advances in Organizational Leadership*, is situated.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “ADVANCES”?

The word *advances* is used deliberately. It does not simply mean that the chapters presented here offer something new because they are recent. Nor does it suggest that previous leadership theories are obsolete. Rather, *advances in organizational leadership* refer to the continued development, questioning, contextualization, integration and application of knowledge about how

leadership enables organizations and the people within them to respond to contemporary challenges and create sustainable value.

Advancement in a field occurs when scholars and practitioners are prepared to ask better questions of established assumptions. It occurs when familiar concepts are examined from new contexts, when previously marginalized perspectives enter the conversation, when theories are connected in productive ways, when evidence challenges accepted practices, and when scholarship generates implications for organizations beyond the academy (Greene, 2022; Lewis, 2025). This understanding is particularly important for organizational leadership in Africa. African organizations do not operate in a vacuum. They participate in global markets, use internationally developed management systems, engage multinational stakeholders and increasingly deploy technologies and organizational practices that transcend national boundaries. At the same time, they are embedded in distinctive historical, institutional, social and cultural realities. Consequently, leadership theories developed predominantly in other contexts cannot simply be assumed to have universal explanatory or practical validity.

Research increasingly demonstrates the importance of examining leadership in Africa on its own terms while also connecting African scholarship to wider international debates. Bolden and Kirk (2009), for example, argue for greater engagement with indigenous knowledge and practices in understanding African leadership. More recent cross-national research involving seven African countries similarly demonstrates that perceptions of effective leadership contain both characteristics familiar from mainstream leadership literature and Africa-centric dimensions such as communalism and Ubuntu (Galperin et al., 2024; Matshoba-Ramuedzisi & Fourie, 2026). This does not mean replacing one

intellectual orthodoxy with another. An African perspective on organizational leadership should not be understood as an argument against global leadership scholarship. Rather, it is an invitation to expand the conversation. African organizational realities can challenge established assumptions, generate new questions, enrich existing theories and contribute concepts and practices of relevance well beyond the continent.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP IS MORE THAN LEADING AN ORGANIZATION

Organizational leadership is sometimes used interchangeably with executive leadership, senior management or leadership of an organization. Although these dimensions overlap, organizational leadership is broader. Organizational leadership concerns the processes through which people collectively provide direction, mobilize resources, make sense of complexity, coordinate action, influence organizational culture, enable change and pursue organizational purposes. It includes formal authority, but it is not confined to formal authority. It includes senior executives, but it is not exclusively the work of senior executives. It encompasses individual leadership, team leadership, distributed leadership, collaborative leadership, strategic leadership and leadership emerging through organizational relationships and systems.

This distinction matters because many of the challenges facing contemporary organizations cannot be solved by positional authority alone. Innovation, digital transformation, organizational change, sustainability, healthcare reform, institutional trust and stakeholder engagement frequently require collaboration across professional, functional and organizational boundaries. Leadership consequently becomes a collective organizational capability,

rather than just an attribute possessed by individuals (Boira Lopez & Connelly, 2025; Gebrihet et al., 2025). The movement towards relational, distributed and complexity-oriented understandings of leadership reflects this broader recognition. Leadership is increasingly examined as something that happens between people as well as something exercised by people. The organization therefore becomes not just the setting in which leadership occurs, but part of the phenomenon being studied. This perspective is especially consequential in contexts characterized by rapid change and resource constraints. In such environments, organizational leaders must collectively provide strategic direction and create conditions in which others can contribute knowledge, solve problems, innovate and adapt. The leader's role increasingly includes enabling rather than simply directing.

Leadership is not solely a technical or instrumental activity. Organizations are social institutions, and leadership consequently involves questions of trust, legitimacy, identity, relationships, responsibility and meaning. The rise of authentic, ethical, servant, relational and values-based approaches to leadership reflects this broader concern. Authentic leadership scholarship, for example, places emphasis on self-awareness, self-regulation, ethical conduct and the development of authentic relationships between leaders and followers (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Chang et al., 2021; de Klerk & Jooste, 2023).

For African organizations, these questions acquire additional significance. African philosophies and social systems contain rich traditions of relationality, communal responsibility and human dignity. Ubuntu, for example, emphasizes interconnectedness and the idea that human flourishing is fundamentally relational (Banda, 2020; Mugumbate et al., 2024). Contemporary scholarship has increasingly explored how Ubuntu can inform leadership,

organizational culture, governance and change in African contexts. Yet Ubuntu should not be reduced to a slogan or treated as a convenient cultural label (Grobler & Powell, 2025). The intellectual challenge is to determine how values such as collective responsibility, dignity, reciprocity, participation, solidarity and humanness can be translated into organizational structures, leadership behaviours, governance systems and measurable organizational outcomes. This is where organizational leadership scholarship has an important role to play. Thus, *advances in organizational leadership require attention not only to what leaders accomplish, but also to how they accomplish it, with whom, for whom, under what conditions and with what consequences.*

This volume is, first, an invitation to rethink organizational leadership from African scholarly perspectives. It brings together contributions that approach contemporary organizational leadership from different but interconnected intellectual and practical angles. It is not intended to provide a single definition of the African leader. Africa is neither culturally nor organizationally homogeneous. The continent encompasses diverse political systems, economies, languages, histories, institutions, organizational cultures and philosophical traditions. Any attempt to construct one universal African leadership model would therefore risk reproducing precisely the simplifications that context-sensitive scholarship seeks to overcome. It is also not an argument that everything developed outside Africa is inappropriate for African organizations.

Global leadership and management scholarship contain substantial theoretical and empirical contributions that remain valuable. The task is to examine the assumptions, applicability and contextual boundaries of existing knowledge while allowing African scholarship and organizational experience to contribute actively

to theory development. This volume is also not a collection of prescriptions for leaders. *Advances in Organizational Leadership* is concerned with scholarship as well as practice. It asks how organizational leadership can be conceptualized more effectively, how evidence can inform practice, how organizational problems can generate new research agendas, and how theories can become more sensitive to the environments in which leadership is enacted. Finally, the book is not suggesting that “new” automatically means “better.” An advance is meaningful only when it deepens understanding, improves explanatory power, opens new avenues for inquiry, enables more effective practice, or challenges assumptions that no longer adequately explain organizational realities.

THE CONTRIBUTION TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

The subtitle of this book, “*Perspectives from African Scholars*,” is therefore important. African scholarship should not be positioned just as an application of theories developed elsewhere. African scholars have an opportunity to contribute to the production of organizational leadership knowledge by interrogating assumptions, documenting organizational realities, developing context-sensitive concepts and generating theories that can travel across contexts. Such scholarship can make at least three important contributions. First, it can provide contextual knowledge. Leadership theories acquire meaning through the environments in which they are enacted. Research across African countries has already shown that leadership preferences contain both globally recognizable characteristics and culturally grounded dimensions.

Second, African scholarship can provide conceptual resources. Ideas associated with Ubuntu, communal responsibility, relationality, collective wellbeing and social embeddedness can enrich conversations about ethical, collaborative and stakeholder-oriented leadership. Contemporary scholarship increasingly argues that African philosophies should be engaged as sources of organizational and leadership knowledge rather than treated merely as cultural illustrations. Third, African organizational experiences can provide theoretical challenges and opportunities. Organizations operating in environments marked by institutional complexity, rapid technological change, resource constraints and diverse stakeholder expectations may reveal leadership dynamics that are less visible in more stable or institutionally mature contexts.

The objective, therefore, is neither intellectual isolation nor uncritical adoption. It is intellectual reciprocity: African scholarship learning from global scholarship while also contributing to, questioning and extending the global conversation. The future of organizational leadership will not be determined by the proliferation of leadership models alone. It will depend on whether leadership scholarship and practice can help organizations become more adaptive without losing their values; more innovative without losing their humanity; more competitive without sacrificing sustainability; more strategic without becoming detached from stakeholders; and more globally connected without becoming disconnected from their contexts. This is why organizational leadership matters.

Leadership ultimately becomes consequential when ideas are translated into organizational realities. A strategy must become action. Governance principles must become institutional practice. Technology must become sustained organizational capability.

Collaboration must become collective performance. Values must become decisions and behaviours, and leadership must become visible not just in what organizations say, but in what they consistently do. The four chapters in this Volume 1 and Part I approach these challenges from different angles. Their common contribution is the conviction that organizational leadership remains a field in development, one that must continue to question, integrate, contextualize and advance.

Advances in Organizational Leadership: Perspectives from African Scholars therefore invites readers to engage with organizational leadership not as a settled body of knowledge, but as an evolving intellectual and practical field. It asks scholars to examine the assumptions underlying existing theories, practitioners to reconsider how leadership is enacted within their organizations, and institutions to reflect on the kind of leadership required to create sustainable value in African and global contexts. The central proposition of this book is that:

Organizational leadership advances when our understanding of leadership advances, and our understanding advances when we are willing to see leadership differently, study it more deeply, locate it within its context, and connect it more deliberately to the realities organizations and societies face.

It is in this spirit that the chapters that follow contribute their perspectives to the continuing conversation on organizational leadership in Africa and beyond.

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PART I

CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP REIMAGINED: A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR AN INTEGRATIVE AESTHETIC MODEL

Gilbert A. Ang'ana

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1357-1550>

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ABSTRACT

Leadership scholarship has progressively shifted from traditional leader-centric perspectives toward relational, collective, and networked approaches capable of addressing increasingly complex organisational and societal challenges. Among these, collaborative leadership has emerged as a potential yet conceptually fragmented field characterised by diverse theoretical foundations, inconsistent definitions, and varied measurement approaches. This study systematically reviews collaborative leadership scholarship to examine its conceptual evolution, theoretical foundations, measurement approaches, and the antecedents, moderating conditions, and outcomes associated with the construct. Guided by the PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines and SPAR-4-SLR framework, the review synthesised 62 peer-reviewed studies published between 1990 and 2026 retrieved from Web of Science and EBSCOhost. The findings indicate that collaborative leadership has evolved into a multidisciplinary leadership paradigm drawing upon transformational, shared and distributed leadership, collaborative governance, and

complexity leadership theories. However, the field continues to exhibit conceptual ambiguity, fragmented operationalisation, and inconsistent measurement. The review further identifies key antecedents, moderating conditions, and organisational outcomes of collaborative leadership. Building on these findings, the study principal contribution is the propositions towards an Integrative Aesthetic Model of Collaborative Leadership that incorporates four experiential dimensions; sensory perception, empathy and relational connection, everyday collaborative atmosphere, and storytelling and organisational symbolism to extend collaborative leadership theory and future empirical research.

Keywords: *Aesthetic leadership; collaborative leadership; leadership; model; systematic literature review.*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership scholarship has undergone a profound transformation over the past five decades. Traditional leadership theories largely portrayed leadership as the actions and influence of an individual occupying a formal position of authority. However, accelerating globalization, digital transformation, increasing organizational interdependence, and the growing complexity of societal challenges have fundamentally altered the contexts within which leadership is exercised (Pearce, 2025; Vuchkovski et al., 2023). Contemporary organizations operate across organizational, sectoral, cultural, and geographical boundaries, requiring leadership approaches that integrate diverse expertise, coordinating multiple stakeholders, and adapt to rapid changing environments (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Agranoff, 2007; Bryson et al., 2015; Vuchkovski et al., 2023). These developments have challenged the adequacy of traditional leadership models and stimulated a broader shift toward relational, shared, networked, and collaborative leadership.

Consequently, the transition has given rise to a family of collective leadership perspectives, including shared leadership, distributed leadership, collective leadership, team leadership, collaborative governance, and collaborative leadership (Spillane, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 2010b; Endres & Weibler, 2019; Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021; Xu et al., 2022; Pearce, 2025; Friedrich et al., 2026). Although these perspectives differ in their theoretical assumptions, they share the fundamental premise that effective leadership emerges through interaction, interdependence, and distributed knowledge rather than through the actions of a single leader. Within this broader evolution, collaborative leadership (CL) has emerged as one of the most promising contemporary leadership paradigms

for understanding how organizations mobilise diverse actors to address increasingly complex organisational and societal challenges.

Unlike traditional leadership models that primarily focus on vertical influence, collaborative leadership emphasises the relational processes through which individuals, teams, organisations, and institutions co-create shared purpose, coordinate collective action, and generate public and organisational value (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Page, 2010; Silvia, 2011; Bryson et al., 2015; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2023). Consequently, there has been a growing scholarly attention on collaborative across public administration, education, healthcare, business, community development, digital transformation, and cross-sector governance, based on its perceived capacity to strengthen innovation, organisational adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable performance (Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Kim, 2018; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2023; Al-Khayari et al., 2024).

Despite these interests and development, collaborative leadership remains one of the least conceptually consolidated areas within contemporary leadership scholarship. The literature frequently overlaps collaborative leadership with related constructs such as shared, distributed, participatory, relational, democratic, collective, and inclusive leadership, often treating these perspectives as interchangeable despite important theoretical differences (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Endres & Weibler, 2019; Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021; Schruijer & Curşeu, 2023; Kislov et al., 2023). Although these perspectives explain how leadership responsibilities may be distributed across multiple actors, they offer only partial explanations of the distinctive relational mechanisms through which collaboration emerges, is negotiated, sustained, and translated into collective outcomes. Moreover, existing

collaborative leadership literature remains fragmented with respect to construct definitions, measurement approaches, theoretical foundations, and contextual applications. Empirical studies employ diverse conceptualisations of collaborative leadership, making it difficult to establish coherent theoretical boundaries or accumulate comparable evidence across organisational settings (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Ang'ana, Ongeti, & Chiroma, 2023). This persistent conceptual ambiguity has constrained theoretical development, inconsistent operationalisation, knowledge building, and meaningful comparison across empirical studies.

Further, while existing studies have identified numerous antecedents and outcomes of collaborative leadership, limited attention has been given to the mechanisms through which collaborative leadership develops, evolves, and is sustained over time, particularly within increasingly complex and adaptive organisational systems (Christensen, 2024; North-Samardzic et al., 2023; Xing et al., 2026). Moreover, little attention has been devoted to understanding how collaborative leadership is experienced by organisational actors themselves. While these experiential dimensions have received increasing attention within broader leadership scholarship, they remain comparatively underexplored within collaborative leadership research (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023). Consequently, important questions remain regarding how collaborative relationships are experienced, interpreted, and sustained within complex organisational environments. These limitations continue to restrict both theoretical advancement and guidance for practitioners seeking to cultivate collaborative leadership in contemporary organisations.

Therefore, this study seeks to synthesise and critically evaluate collaborative leadership scholarship published between 1990 and 2026, tracing its conceptual evolution from its origins to its

contemporary multidisciplinary applications. Specifically, the study examines the theoretical foundations, definitions and measurement approaches, antecedents, contextual and moderating conditions, and organisational outcomes associated with collaborative leadership across diverse organisational contexts. Integrating and critically evaluating scholarship enables the study identifies conceptual, theoretical, and methodological gaps that continue to shape the field and future research. The study further seeks to extend collaborative leadership scholarship by introducing an aesthetic leadership perspective that complements prevailing structural, behavioural, and relational explanations, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of how collaborative leadership is experienced, enacted, and sustained within organisational settings (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023).

The review is guided by four research questions; how has collaborative leadership evolved as a concept? What is the theoretical foundation of collaborative leadership? How is collaborative leadership defined and measured? What antecedents, moderators, and organisational outcomes characterise collaborative leadership? The next section explains the systematic literature review methodology adopted in the study. The findings are then presented according to the research questions, beginning with the characteristics of the reviewed studies before synthesising the evidence relating to the conceptualisation, theoretical foundations, measurement, antecedents, moderators, and outcomes of collaborative leadership. The study also proposes an integrative model of collaborative leadership, highlighting unresolved tensions and directions for future research, including the value of incorporating leadership aesthetic into collaborative leadership scholarship before the conclusion and reflexivity.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) methodology to synthesise and critically evaluate collaborative leadership scholarship. The review followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure methodological transparency, reproducibility, and rigorous reporting. In addition, the review was informed by the SPAR-4-SLR protocol (Paul et al., 2021), which provides a structured framework for conducting systematic literature reviews in organizational research through three iterative stages; assembling, arranging, and assessing. Combining PRISMA with SPAR-4-SLR strengthened both the procedural rigour of the review and the systematic synthesis of collaborative leadership scholarship.

Assembling the literature

The assembling stage involved identifying and retrieving relevant literature through a comprehensive and systematic search strategy. The literature search was conducted in May 2026 using Web of Science as the principal database because of its comprehensive coverage of high-quality, peer-reviewed journals in leadership, management, public administration, education, and organizational studies. To improve coverage across disciplinary domains, complementary searches were conducted through EBSCOhost and PubMed, particularly to capture collaborative leadership studies within healthcare and related interdisciplinary fields. The search strategy combined keywords using Boolean operators to maximise retrieval of relevant studies while maintaining specificity. The primary search terms were "collaborative leadership" OR

"leadership collaboration". These were combined with organisational context terms including "organisation" OR "workplace", together with conceptual and outcome-related terms including "theory", "framework", "model", "conceptual", "empirical", and "methodology". The search strings were adapted where necessary to accommodate the indexing requirements of individual databases. This strategy was designed to identify studies examining the conceptual, theoretical, empirical, and methodological development of collaborative leadership.

Arranging the literature

The arranging stage involved screening, selecting, and organising studies according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Study selection followed a two-stage screening process. During the first stage, titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria. Studies were included if they: examined collaborative leadership, leadership collaboration, or collaborative governance as a leadership phenomenon; were published as peer-reviewed journal articles; were written in English; were published between 1990 and 2026, reflecting the period during which collaborative leadership emerged as a distinct and widely studied leadership paradigm; and contributed conceptual, theoretical, empirical, or methodological insights into collaborative leadership. Studies were excluded if they: did not make a substantive contribution to collaborative leadership scholarship; focused exclusively on non-organisational contexts such as family groups or sports teams; were conference abstracts, dissertations, editorials, book reviews, or other non-peer-reviewed publications; lacked a clear conceptual or empirical contribution to collaborative leadership; or comprised grey literature, working papers, or unpublished manuscripts. Following title and abstract screening, full-text articles were retrieved and assessed against the eligibility criteria.

Only studies satisfying all inclusion criteria and demonstrating sufficient methodological quality were retained for the final review.

To enhance the credibility and dependability of the review process, the second stage incorporated an independent assessment by a colleague experienced in conducting systematic literature reviews. The reviewer independently evaluated study selection and adherence to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Where differences in judgement emerged regarding article eligibility, both reviewer and author re-examined the studies in relation to the review objectives and research questions until consensus was reached. This collaborative approach enhanced inter-rater reliability and reduced the potential for selection bias (Clark et al., 2021).

Assessing and synthesising the literature

The assessing stage focused on evaluating the methodological quality and scholarly contribution of the included studies while synthesising the evidence to address the review objectives. Data extraction captured publication characteristics, research context, theoretical foundations, conceptualisations of collaborative leadership, methodological approaches, measurement instruments, antecedents, moderators, and organisational outcomes. The extracted data were subsequently analysed thematically to identify recurring concepts, theoretical developments, methodological patterns, and emerging research directions across the collaborative leadership literature.

The initial database search yielded 401 studies. After initial screening 195 potential studies were identified for full screening. Following the application of a three stage inclusion and exclusion criteria, 134 studies were excluded, resulting in a final sample of 62 peer-reviewed articles for detailed analysis. The study selection

process is summarised in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 2), which documents each stage of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion, thereby enhancing transparency and reproducibility (Page et al., 2021; Siddaway et al., 2019). Although a review protocol (Figure 1 in the Appendix) was developed prior to commencing the study, it was not registered with PROSPERO because this study addresses an interdisciplinary organisational and leadership research rather than health intervention studies, which constitute PROSPERO's primary scope. The final literature used in the study provided a robust evidence base for examining the conceptual evolution, theoretical foundations, measurement approaches, antecedents, contextual influences, and organisational outcomes of collaborative leadership while identifying key gaps that informed future theory development.

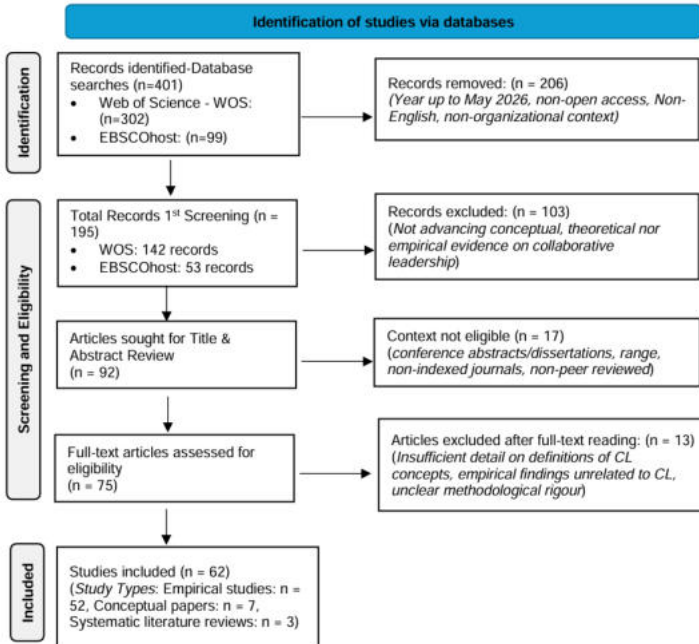
Methodological considerations

Methodology observation and reflection is an important part in qualitative research process (Abbott et al., 2025). Despite employing a highly focused search strategy and stringent inclusion and exclusion criteria, a substantial proportion of the retrieved studies conceptualised collaborative leadership alongside closely related constructs such as shared, distributed, collective, participatory, relational, democratic, and inclusive leadership. This overlap was evident across conceptual discussions, theoretical frameworks, construct definitions, measurement approaches, and empirical investigations. Rather than representing a limitation of the review process, this finding reflects the current state of collaborative leadership scholarship, where the conceptual boundaries separating collaborative leadership from related leadership theories

remain insufficiently defined. Consequently, the review process itself provided further empirical support for one of the central arguments of this study, that collaborative leadership continues to exhibit considerable conceptual ambiguity despite its increasing scholarly prominence.

Therefore, the study selection extended beyond keyword matching to include careful assessment of each article's primary theoretical and empirical contribution. Studies were retained only when they made a substantive contribution to advancing collaborative leadership theory, conceptualisation, measurement, or empirical understanding. Studies in which collaborative leadership appeared only as an outlier concept or was used interchangeably with other leadership constructs without explicit conceptual development were excluded from the final synthesis. This methodological approach ensured that the review remained theoretically focused while acknowledging the interdisciplinary and interconnected nature of contemporary leadership scholarship.

In line with the SPAR-4-SLR framework (Paul et al., 2021), the iterative processes of assembling, arranging, and assessing the literature enabled continuous refinement of study selection and concepts throughout the review. Rather than eliminating conceptual diversity, the author deliberately documented and synthesised these areas of convergence and divergence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolution, theoretical foundations, and conceptual development of collaborative leadership. Consequently, the conceptual overlap identified during the review is presented as an important finding that informs the interpretation of the literature and reinforces the need for greater theoretical clarity within collaborative leadership research.

Figure 2*PRISMA Flow Diagram for Study Selection*

Source: Page et al. (2021); Author (2026)

FINDINGS

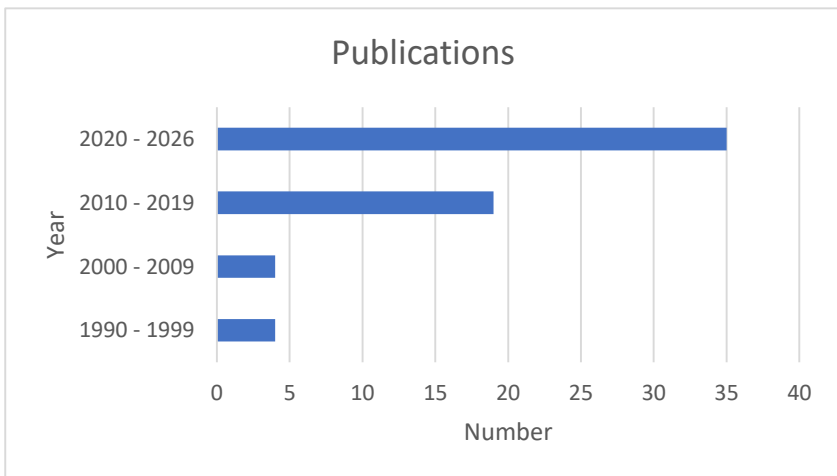
The findings of this study are presented in two sections. The first section reports the bibliometric analysis of the systematic literature review, providing an overview of publication trends, methodological characteristics, geographical distribution, organizational contexts, and publication outlets. The second section presents the content analysis, synthesizing the themes, patterns, and insights that emerged from the reviewed literature to address the study research questions.

Bibliometric analysis

The sixty-two (62) studies analysed were published between 1990 to 2026, with a notable increase in publication frequency after 2009 as shown in Figure 3. The findings indicate that research in this field has experienced sustained growth over the past three decades, with a marked increase in publications after 2009, suggesting rising scholarly interest and increasing recognition of collaborative leadership theoretical and practical significance. This upward trajectory reflects the emergence of collaborative leadership research agenda, and likely driven by evolving societal, technological, or policy developments that have heightened the relevance of the concept to date (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Maalouf, 2019).

Figure 3

The trend on the number of published papers in ten-year intervals (62 papers).

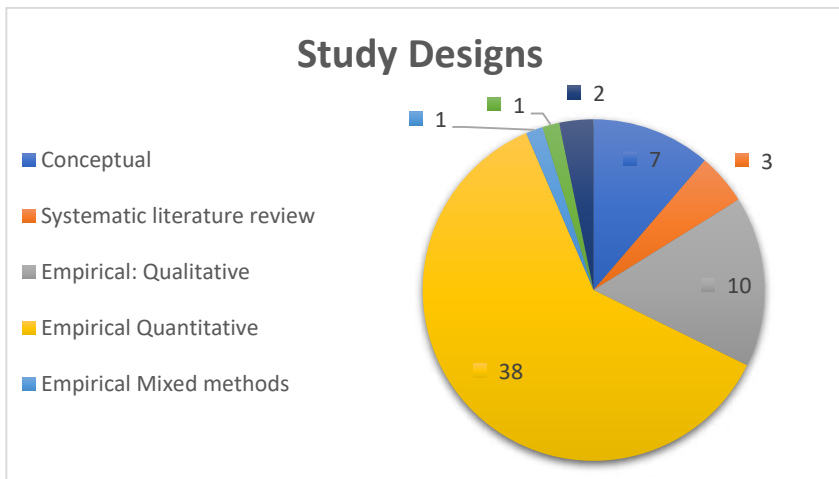


Source: Reviewed data (2026)

Moreover, the majority of studies (61%, $n=38$) were empirical quantitative papers, while 16% ($n=10$) employed empirical qualitative methodologies, and 11% ($n=7$) were theoretical or conceptual papers as shown in Figure 4. The predominance of empirical quantitative studies (61%) demonstrates that the field has largely prioritized hypothesis testing and the generation of generalizable evidence. However, the comparatively limited representation of qualitative (16%) and theoretical or conceptual studies (11%) points to an imbalance in methodological and theoretical development. This suggests that, while the field has established a strong empirical foundation, the foundation is based on the conceptual limitations noted in this review (Bingham & Choi, 2010; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a). There remains considerable opportunity for richer inquiry and stronger theory building to deepen understanding and advance the field's conceptual maturity

Figure 4

Published papers study design (62 papers).



Source: Reviewed data (2026)

Further, collaborative leadership research has a diverse range of organizational contexts including public sector (16 studies), schools (12 studies), diverse organizational setting (12 studies), public sector and healthcare (at 6 studies each) among other sectors and interorganizational networks as shown in Table 1. The distribution of studies across organizational contexts demonstrates that collaborative leadership is a cross-sectoral concept, although research has been concentrated primarily in the public sector (17 studies), schools (12 studies), and broader organizational settings (12 studies). This pattern suggests that collaborative leadership interest emerges from organizational environment characterized by complex stakeholder relationships and interdependent decision-making. The limited attention given to other sectors such as businesses and higher education indicates potential gaps and opportunities for future research (Muslim et al., 2022; Nkengbeza et al., 2016).

Table 1

Number of published papers by broad sector (62 papers).

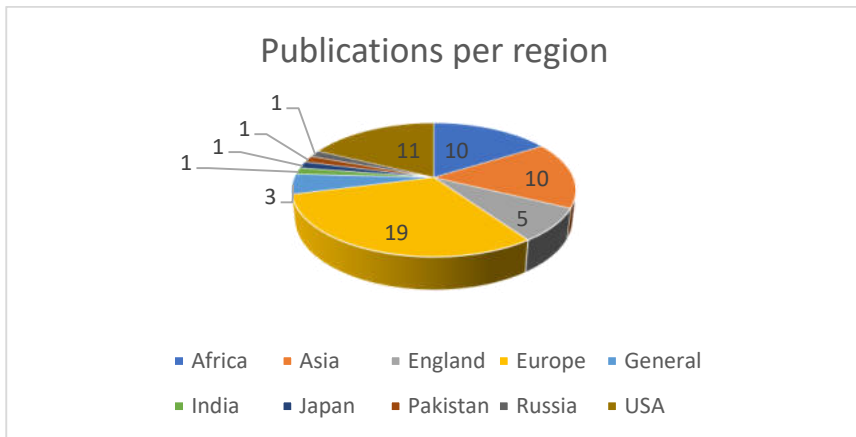
Sector	Number of Articles
Insurance companies	2
Local Enterprises	3
Higher education	5
Healthcare/ Homecare	6
Non-profit organizations	6
Organizational Settings	12
Schools	12
Public sector	16
Grand Total	62

Source: Reviewed data (2026)

The geographical distribution of the reviewed studies reveals an uneven global landscape of collaborative leadership research, with Europe contributing the largest share of publications (19 studies), followed by the USA (11), and Africa and Asia (10 studies each) as shown in Figure 5. This concentration suggests that the empirical and theoretical development of collaborative leadership has been driven predominantly by Western contexts, while contributions from other regions remain comparatively limited. The relatively modest representation from Africa and Asia, despite their complexities and challenges, highlights an important opportunity for scholarship that can enrich the field by incorporating diverse cultural, institutional, and socio-political perspectives.

Figure 5

Number of published papers per region (62 papers).



Source: Reviewed data (2026)

The distribution of publications across scientific journals as shown in Table 2 demonstrates that collaborative leadership research is

highly multidisciplinary, spanning fields such as leadership, education, public administration, management, healthcare, governance, and organizational studies. The fact that no single journal dominates the field suggests that the literature is dispersed across multiple scholarly outlets rather than concentrated within specialized journals. This dispersion reflects the broad applicability of collaborative leadership across diverse disciplines and organizational contexts. However, it also indicates that knowledge development remains fragmented, underscoring the need for greater theoretical integration and cross-disciplinary synthesis to strengthen the coherence and advance collaborative leadership scholarship.

Table 2

Distribution of papers in scientific journals (62 papers)

Scientific journals	Count of Article
International Journal of Leadership in Education	3
ArXiv	2
Journal of Human Resource & Leadership	2
Local Economy	2
Public Administration Quarterly	2
Public Administration Review	2
School Leadership & Management	2
The Leadership Quarterly	2
West European Politics	2
Africa Education Review	1
An International Journal of Complexity and Education	1

BMC Health Services Research	1
Business Research	1
Collaborative Librarianship	1
Educational Management Administration & Leadership	1
Edunesia : Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan	1
Foresight	1
Harvard Business Review	1
Home Health Care Management & Practice.	1
International Journal of Conflict Management	1
International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development	1
International nursing review	1
IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM)	1
Journal of Business and Management Sciences	1
Journal of Change Management	1
Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics	1
Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies	1
Journal of Leadership Studies	1
Journal of Management & Governance	1
Journal of Management & Organization	1
Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership	1
Journal of Positive School Psychology	1
Journal of Public Affairs Education	1
Journal of the Knowledge Economy	1
Leadership	1
Leadership and Policy in Schools	1
Library Management	1
Local Government Studies	1
Open Science Journal	1
Organizational Psychology Review	1

Public Governance Administration and Finances Law Review	1
Public Management Review	1
Public Performance & Management Review	1
Review of Public Personnel Administration	1
Revista De Administração De Empresas	1
RUDN Journal Of Public Administration	1
School Effectiveness and School Improvement	1
South Asian Journal of Business and Management Cases	1
State and Local Government Review	1
Systems	1
The Educational Forum	1
The University Journal	1
Grand Total	62

Source: Reviewed data (2026)

Content analysis

The content analysis synthesizes the findings of the reviewed studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of collaborative leadership and its development as a field of inquiry. Guided by the study's research questions.

How has collaborative leadership evolved as a concept?

Collaborative leadership has emerged as one of the contemporary leadership paradigms for understanding how organizations, institutions, and cross-sector partnerships address increasingly complex and interdependent challenges. Its development reflects broader shifts in leadership scholarship from traditional models toward relational, shared, and systems approaches. Although the

term appeared sporadically during the 1970s (Finch, 1977), it remained largely underdeveloped until the early 1990s when growing organizational interdependence, partnerships, and complex governance created renewed scholarly interest. During this foundational period between 1970s to 1990s, collaborative leadership was largely conceptual, emphasizing participation, partnerships, and relational leadership (Finch, 1977; Rost, 1991; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Finley, 1994; Kanter, 1994). Traditional leadership models increasingly proved inadequate for addressing problems characterized by uncertainty, multiple stakeholders, distributed expertise, and rapidly changing organizational environments.

From the 1990s to 2010, globalization, rapid technological advancement, increasing organizational complexity, and the expansion of cross-sector partnerships shifted leadership research away from hierarchical models toward relational, shared, and network-based approaches that emphasized collaboration, adaptability, and interdependence (Bingham & Nabatchi, 2005; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Kanter, 1994; Agranoff, 2007). Moreover, the period between 2010 and 2020 represents a critical phase in the conceptual development, theoretical refinement, and empirical expansion of collaborative leadership across public, private, and non-profit sectors. During this period, scholarship increasingly examined collaborative leadership as a mechanism for addressing complex societal and organizational challenges through collaborative governance, public administration, cross-sector partnerships, and network leadership (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015; Silvia, 2011; Page, 2010; O'Leary & Bingham, 2009; Cristofoli et al., 2020).

Across these phases, collaborative leadership evolved from a participatory and partnership-based concept into a multidimensional leadership paradigm integrating insights from transformational leadership, shared and distributed leadership, collaborative governance, and complexity theory. These phases also coincided with accelerating globalization, digital transformation, and increasing organizational complexity, which reinforced the importance of collaboration in addressing interconnected and adaptive challenges (Müller & Van Esch, 2020; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Vuchkovski et al., 2023). Consequently, researchers conceptualized collaborative leadership as a distributed team process, shifting attention from individual leaders to collective leadership through shared, distributed, and collective leadership perspectives (Spillane, 2005; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Endres & Weibler, 2019; Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021; Xu et al., 2022; Pearce, 2025; Friedrich et al., 2026).

From 2020 to date, scholars have increasingly conceptualized leadership as an emergent capability within complex adaptive systems characterized by digital transformation, artificial intelligence (AI), interorganizational networks, and rapidly evolving societal challenges. Rather than viewing collaborative leadership as the responsibility of a single individual, contemporary research emphasizes adaptive interactions, relational dynamics, and collective problem-solving across organizational and institutional boundaries (Ang'ana, et al, 2023; Moore et al., 2023; North-Samardzic et al., 2023; Begeç & Akyuz, 2023; Xing et al., 2026). This shift reflects broader transformations in organizational environments. Moreover, Technological disruption, digitalisation, globalization, increasing interdependence, and growing uncertainty have exposed the limitations of traditional leadership models. Consequently, organizations now require leadership

approaches capable of mobilising collective intelligence, shared expertise, innovation, and adaptive capacity (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Al-Khayari et al., 2024; Aryee et al., 2025; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Cheboi et al., 2026; Christensen, 2024; Cristofoli et al., 2020; Vuchkovski et al., 2023; Xing et al., 2026).

Despite these significant theoretical advances, consensus regarding the conceptual development of collaborative leadership remains limited (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Al-Khayari et al., 2024; Aryee et al., 2025). Conceptual clarity is fundamental to theory development because it determines how constructs are defined, measured, and empirically tested. Ambiguous conceptual boundaries make it difficult to compare findings across studies, accumulate knowledge, and distinguish collaborative leadership from adjacent leadership theories. Consequently, improving conceptual precision has become a major priority in contemporary collaborative leadership scholarship. The extant literature overlaps collaborative leadership with related constructs such as shared, distributed, participatory, relational, democratic, and inclusive leadership, treating these perspectives as interchangeable despite their theoretical distinctions (Ang'ana et al., 2023; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Kislov et al., 2023; Schruijer & Curşeu, 2023). This conceptual convergence has limited theoretical precision, making it difficult to distinguish collaborative leadership as a unique leadership paradigm and limiting knowledge development.

Recent scholarship is now shifting from asking whether collaborative leadership matters, to, understanding what fundamentally constitutes collaborative leadership. Rather than equating collaborative leadership with shared decision-making or distributed authority, emerging studies argue that collaborative leadership is an integrative process in which authentic relationships, leadership

behaviours, and supportive governance structures interact to enable collective action (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Ang'ana et al., 2023). These perspectives reposition collaborative leadership as a distinct leadership paradigm. While scholarship has attempted to clarify the structural, behavioural, and relational dimensions of collaborative leadership, a critical gap remain. The aesthetic dimensions through which collaborative leadership is felt, interpreted, and sustained remain largely underexplored within scholarship.

An aesthetic perspective complements existing structural and behavioural explanations by recognizing that collaborative leadership is not only enacted through formal processes but is also experienced emotionally, symbolically, and relationally by organizational actors. This study therefore argues that contemporary collaborative leadership scholarship requires moving beyond structural and behavioural explanations to incorporate an aesthetic perspective. Examining collaborative leadership through this lens offers new insights into how collaborative leadership is formed, sustained, and translated into organizational outcomes. The next research questions therefore explore collaborative leadership through an aesthetic lens to extend existing conceptualizations and provide a more holistic understanding of its evolution, theoretical foundations, measurement, antecedents, contextual influences, and organizational outcomes.

What is the theoretical foundation of collaborative leadership?

The findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership does not originate from a single theoretical tradition but is instead an interdisciplinary construct that has evolved through the convergence of four dominant theoretical perspectives: transforma-

tional, shared, collaborative governance, and complexity leadership theories. Earlier scholarship was largely anchored in transformational leadership, where collaboration was conceptualized as a relational process founded on shared purpose, values, trust, and mutual influence between leaders and followers (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Rost, 1991). More recent scholarship extends this relational foundation through relational leadership theory, arguing that leadership is less about formal authority and more about dialogue, inclusion, co-creation, and the development of social capital (North-Samardzic et al., 2023; O'Leary & Bingham, 2009; Xing et al., 2026). Across these perspectives, there is broad scholarly convergence that collaboration is fundamentally a social and relational phenomenon rather than an individual leadership trait.

A second pattern emerging from the literature is the shift from leader-centric to collective leadership. Shared and distributed leadership theories consistently argue that leadership is generated through interactions among multiple actors rather than residing in positional authority (Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021; Endres & Weibler, 2019; Spillane, 2005). This perspective converges with collaborative governance theory, which expands collaborative leadership beyond organizational teams to encompass governments, civil society, private organizations, and interorganizational networks operating through shared decision-making, participation, legitimacy, and public value creation (Agranoff, 2007; Bryson & Crosby, 2015; Christensen, 2024). However, recent critical and decolonial scholarship challenges the implicit assumption that collaborative processes are inherently egalitarian, arguing that power asymmetries, unequal participation, and issues of legitimacy and voice continue to shape collaborative leadership outcomes (Friedrich et al., 2026; North-Samardzic et al., 2023).

This represents an important theoretical evolution from collaboration as coordination toward collaboration as negotiated governance embedded within complex social and political contexts.

Finally, contemporary research increasingly situates collaborative leadership within complexity leadership theory, reflecting the growing recognition that modern organizational and societal challenges require adaptive, cross-boundary, and systems leadership. Rather than focusing solely on interpersonal relationships, recent studies conceptualize collaborative leadership as an adaptive capability that enables organizations to respond to wicked problems through learning, innovation, institutional coordination, digital transformation, and multi-stakeholder partnerships supporting sustainable development agendas such as the SDGs and Africa's Agenda 2063 (Aryee et al., 2025; Muslim et al., 2022; Onyango, 2024; van der Voet & Steijn, 2020). These extant scholarships suggest that collaborative leadership has evolved from a relational leadership approach into a multidimensional systems paradigm that integrates interpersonal, organizational, governance, and adaptive perspectives.

This study therefore argues that collaborative leadership should be understood not as a standalone leadership theory but as an integrative theoretical framework that draws on multiple complementary models to explain how leadership is enacted in increasingly interconnected, complex, and collaborative environments. Table 3 gives a summary of the theoretical foundations.

Table 3

Theoretical foundations of collaborative leadership.

Theory	Contributions to Collaborative Leadership	Authors
Transformational Leadership Theory (including Relational Leadership)	Explains collaborative leadership as a transformative, relational process based on mutual influence, shared purpose, collective vision, trust, values, dialogue, inclusion, co-creation, social capital, and moral leadership. Emphasizes leadership as a social process rather than positional authority, supported by trust-building and facilitation behaviours.	Leithwood & Jantzi (1990); Begeç & Akyuz (2023); Abdelwahab et al. (2024); Al-Khayari et al. (2024); van der Voet & Steijn (2020); Hallinger & Heck (2010a); Hallinger & Heck (2010b); Ridlo et al. (2025); Hafeez & Akhtar (2022); Schlebusch (2020)
Shared Leadership Theory (including Distributed and Collective Leadership)	Explains collaborative leadership as shared and distributed across individuals and emerging through interactions rather than formal positions. Emphasizes joint decision-making, empowerment, collective agency, shared responsibility, practice-based leadership, collective cognition, and coordination.	Spillane (2005); Döös & Wilhelmson (2021); Pearce (2025); Xu et al. (2022); Fournier et al. (2022); Friedrich, Kark & Preser (2026); Endres & Weibler (2019); Curseu & Schruijer (2024); Mullen & Kochan (2000)

Collaborative Governance Theory (including Network Leadership, Public Value, and Critical/Decolonial Perspectives)	Explains collaboration across governments, private organizations, civil society, and interorganizational networks. Emphasizes multi-stakeholder governance, legitimacy, participation, accountability, public value creation, citizen engagement, boundary-spanning leadership, trust, coordination, and interdependence. Contemporary perspectives further examine power asymmetries, inclusion, legitimacy, voice, and decolonial critiques of collaboration.	Agranoff (2007); Bingham & Nabatchi (2005); Bryson, Crosby & Stone (2015); Crosby & Bryson (2005); O'Leary & Bingham (2009); Page (2010); Silvia (2011); Christensen (2024); Muslim, Prasojó & Salomo (2022); Gafur et al. (2023); Müller & Van Esch (2020); Cristofoli et al. (2020); Onyango (2024); Xing et al. (2026); Kim (2018); Broadhurst et al. (2021).
Complexity Leadership Theory (including Adaptive Leadership, Organizational Leadership, Sustainable Development, and Digital Collaboration)	Explains collaborative leadership as an adaptive capability for addressing complex adaptive systems and wicked problems. Emphasizes emergence, learning, adaptation, innovation, cross-functional teamwork, organizational effectiveness, institutional coordination, SDGs and Agenda 2063 partnerships, governance capacity, human–AI collaboration, digital	Chrislip & Larson (1994); Rost (1991); Kanter (1994); Finley (1994); Finch (1977); Ang'ana & Chiroma (2021); Ang'ana & Kilika (2022); Ang'ana et al. (2023); Moore, Elliott & Hesselgreaves (2023); North-Samardzic et al. (2023); Broadhurst

governance ecosystems, and knowledge co-creation.	et al. (2021); Emihovich & Battaglia (2000); Herrera-Pastor et al. (2020); Nkengbeza et al. (2016); Wilson (2018); Kristin (2018); Lim (2018); Kochanowski (1997); Bingham & Choi (2010); Getha-Taylor & Morse (2013); Mukua-Marú et al. (2023); Egitim (2025).
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Source: Reviewed data (2026)

How is collaborative leadership defined, and measured?

The findings reveal considerable convergence regarding the definition of collaborative leadership, despite differences in disciplinary perspectives and organizational contexts. Across the literature, collaborative leadership is consistently defined as a relational, collective, and process-oriented form of leadership that enables multiple actors to work across organizational, institutional, and sectoral boundaries to achieve shared goals. Early conceptualizations by Chrislip and Larson (1994), Bingham and Nabatchi (2005) and Crosby and Bryson (2005) primarily positioned collaborative leadership within public leadership, emphasizing consensus building, stakeholder participation, shared decision-making, and the creation of public value. Subsequent

scholarship expanded these perspectives by incorporating distributed and relational leadership theories, defining collaborative leadership as an emergent social process grounded in trust, dialogue, shared influence, and collective agency rather than formal authority (Spillane, 2006; Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021).

More recent studies extend the construct to include organizational collaboration, interorganizational networks, digital ecosystems, and sustainable development partnerships, reflecting the growing complexity of contemporary leadership environments (Onyango, 2024; Xing et al., 2026). Although there is substantial agreement regarding the relational and collaborative nature of the construct, this study identifies important conceptual divergence concerning its unit of analysis and theoretical emphasis. Some scholars conceptualize collaborative leadership primarily as leader behaviours, focusing on facilitation, trust-building, communication, and coordination (Xing et al., 2026; Mukua-Marua et al., 2023), while others view it as a collective leadership capability emerging through networks, stakeholder interactions, and institutional arrangements (Bryson & Crosby, 2015; Cristofoli et al., 2020; Muslim et al., 2022). Contemporary perspectives further argue that collaborative leadership cannot be fully understood without considering issues of power, inclusion, identity, and legitimacy that shape collaborative processes (North-Samardzic et al., 2023; Friedrich et al., 2026). These differences suggest that collaborative leadership is best understood as a multidimensional construct operating simultaneously at individual, team, organizational, and network levels rather than as a single leadership behaviour.

Further, extant literature also demonstrates that the measurement of collaborative leadership has evolved alongside its conceptual development. Earlier studies relied predominantly

on qualitative approaches, including case studies and narrative inquiry, to understand collaborative processes (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Bingham & Nabatchi, 2005). More recent research increasingly employs quantitative and mixed-methods approaches, including survey instruments, structural equation modelling, social network analysis, multi-level modelling, behavioural scales, governance indicators, and organizational performance measures (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Ang'ana et al., 2023; Curşeu & Schruijer, 2024). These methodological differences reflect a growing effort to operationalize collaborative leadership as a measurable construct while acknowledging its inherently relational and contextual nature. The study argues that no single measurement approach adequately captures collaborative leadership. Instead, it requires robust assessment and multidimensional measures that integrate leadership behaviours, relational processes, governance indicators, network dynamics, and organizational outcomes. Table 4 summarizes the definitions and measurements from the review.

Table 4.

Definition and measurement of collaborative leadership

Scholar(s)	Definition of Collaborative Leadership	Common Measurement Approaches
Chrislip & Larson (1994)	Leadership that brings diverse stakeholders together to address public problems through consensus, shared responsibility, and collective action.	Qualitative case studies, stakeholder engagement analysis, consensus-building processes, civic outcomes.

Crosby & Bryson (2005); Bingham & Nabatchi (2005)	Leadership in shared-power governance systems emphasizing stakeholder participation, collaborative decision-making, legitimacy, and public value creation.	Mixed methods, governance indicators, stakeholder participation indices, policy outcomes and measures.
Spillane (2006); Döös & Wilhelmson (2021); van der Voet & Steijn (2020)	Leadership distributed across multiple actors through shared influence, collective responsibility, and interaction rather than formal authority.	Shared leadership scales, social network analysis, multilevel modelling, leadership distribution indices, interaction mapping, longitudinal team studies.
Hallinger & Heck (2010); Mukua-Marua et al. (2023); Ang'ana et al. (2023)	Collaborative leadership as shared responsibility, communication, empowerment, authentic relationships, and coordinated leadership behaviours that improve organizational performance.	Survey instruments, structural equation modelling, regression analysis, factor analysis, team effectiveness scales, organizational performance indicators.
Silvia (2011); Cristofoli et al. (2021); North-Samardzic et al. (2023); Xing et al. (2026); Friedrich et al. (2026)	Collaborative leadership as a relational, socially constructed process emerging through trust, dialogue, coordination, boundary-spanning interactions, inclusion, identity, and power dynamics.	Qualitative case studies, narrative analysis, relational mapping, process tracing, network centrality, trust and relational capital scales, behavioural observation, inclusion and equity metrics.

Muslim et al. (2022); Onyango (2024)	Collaborative leadership as a governance capability that enables multi-stakeholder partnerships, inter-agency coordination, and institutional collaboration for sustainable development and public service delivery.	Governance indicators, partnership effectiveness metrics, trust indices, organization effectiveness measures, policy implementation outcomes.
Curşeu & Schruijer (2024); Ang'ana & Kilika (2022); Ang'ana et al. (2023)	Collaborative leadership as leadership without formal authority, integrating shared purpose, authentic relationships, and joint action within organizational systems.	Multiparty Collaborative Leadership Scale (MCLS), behavioural indicators, systematic literature synthesis.

Source: Reviewed data (2026)

What antecedents, moderators, and organisational outcomes characterise collaborative leadership?

The findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership is not an isolated leadership approach but an adaptive construct that emerges in response to organizational, institutional, and societal dynamism. From the reviewed studies, the most consistent antecedents include organizational complexity, task and resource interdependence, stakeholder diversity, shared purpose, and authentic relationships indicating the increasing need for cross-sector collaboration to address complex or "wicked" problems (Crosby & Bryson, 2005; Agranoff, 2007; Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; Muslim et al., 2022). Contemporary studies further identify digital transformation, sustainability, inter-agency dependence, and boundary-spanning as emerging drivers of collaborative leadership

(Onyango, 2024; Xing et al., 2026). These findings suggest that collaborative leadership is an adaptive response to dynamism in the environments characterized by high levels of complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence, where traditional leadership approaches are insufficient.

Further, while there is broad consensus regarding the conditions that give rise to collaborative leadership, the literature consistently argues that its effectiveness is contingent upon several moderating factors. Trust emerges as the most frequently cited moderator, knowledge sharing, and stakeholder commitment across all organizational contexts. Other recurring moderators include organizational culture, communication quality, leadership support, governance structures, institutional legitimacy, political environments, psychological safety, team cohesion, administrative capacity, and power relations (Spillane, 2006; Cristofoli et al., 2021; Döös & Wilhelmson, 2021; Ang'ana et al., 2023). More recent scholarship extends this discussion by demonstrating that collaborative leadership is also shaped by identity, inclusion, gender, and institutional power asymmetries, challenging the assumption that collaboration drives equitable participation (Friedrich et al., 2026; North-Samardzic et al., 2023). These study argues that collaborative leadership depends on supportive relational, organizational, and institutional conditions for effective outcomes.

Furthermore, the outcomes associated with collaborative leadership are consistently positive across the literature, although they vary according to context. At the organizational level, collaborative leadership is linked to improved team performance, innovation, organizational effectiveness, communication, school improvement, and sustainability (Hallinger & Heck, 2010b; Ang'ana et al., 2023; Mukua-Marua et al., 2023). At the governance level, it contributes to stronger policy coordination, improved

service delivery, enhanced civic engagement, democratic legitimacy, and greater public value creation (Agranoff, 2007; Bryson & Crosby, 2015; Cristofoli et al., 2021). In development contexts, collaborative leadership facilitates SDG implementation, institutional coordination, and cross-sector partnerships (Muslim et al., 2022; Onyango, 2024). However, there are also other perspectives cautioning that collaborative leadership may also reproduce exclusion and legitimacy challenges when underlying power imbalances remain unaddressed (Friedrich et al., 2026). Table 5 summarizes the antecedents, moderators and outcomes of collaborative leadership.

Table 5

Antecedents, moderators, and outcomes of collaborative leadership

Dimension	Major Themes Identified in the Literature	Representative Authors
Antecedents	Organizational and environmental conditions that necessitate collaborative leadership, including organizational complexity, task and resource interdependence, stakeholder diversity, shared purpose, authentic relationships, leadership commitment, policy fragmentation, institutional openness, citizen participation, governance complexity, cross-sector dependence, network interdependence, development	Bryson & Crosby (2015); Bingham, Nabatchi & O'Leary (2005); Spillane (2006); Agranoff (2007); Hallinger & Heck (2010); Cristofoli et al. (2021); Döös & Wilhelmson (2021); Muslim et al. (2022); Ang'ana & Kilika (2022); Ang'ana et al., (2023); Mukua-Marua et al. (2023); Onyango (2024); Xing et al. (2026); Friedrich et al. (2026).

	priorities (SDGs and Agenda 2063), digital transformation, communication systems, empowerment, boundary-spanning, and trust-building processes.	
Moderators	Factors influencing the effectiveness of collaborative leadership, including trust, organizational culture, communication quality, governance structures, institutional legitimacy, political environment, administrative capacity, leadership support, organizational structure, school capacity, accountability systems, psychological safety, team cohesion, network density, tie strength, social capital, cultural alignment, conflict management, policy alignment, funding structures, identity dynamics, gender, inclusion, and power asymmetries.	Bryson & Crosby (2015); Spillane (2006); Agranoff (2007); Hallinger & Heck (2010); Cristofoli et al. (2021); Döös & Wilhelmson (2021); Muslim et al. (2022); Ang'ana et al. (2023); Mukua-Marua et al. (2023); Onyango (2024); Xing et al. (2026); Friedrich et al. (2026).
Outcomes	Collaborative leadership contributes to improved organizational and societal performance through enhanced teamwork, innovation, organizational effectiveness, school improvement, student achievement, policy coordination, service delivery,	Bryson & Crosby (2015); Bingham, Nabatchi & O'Leary (2005); Agranoff (2007); Hallinger & Heck (2010a); Cristofoli et al. (2021); Döös & Wilhelmson (2021); Muslim et al. (2022); Ang'ana & Kilika (2022); Ang'ana et al., (2023);

governance effectiveness, democratic legitimacy, public value creation, stakeholder trust, civic engagement, SDG implementation, institutional coordination, sustainability, adaptive capacity, and reduced duplication. Critical perspectives also identify potential outcomes related to exclusion, inequitable participation, and legitimacy challenges where collaborative processes fail to address underlying power dynamics.	Mukua-Maru et al. (2023); Onyango (2024); Xing et al. (2026); Friedrich et al. (2026).
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Source: Reviewed data (2026)

DISCUSSIONS

The evidence from extant reviewed scholarship suggests that collaborative leadership is an integrative, relational, and contextually constructed phenomenon that emerges through the dynamic interaction of multiple dimensions. Across the literature, collaborative leadership is consistently presented as the convergence of relational processes, distributed influence, adaptive capacities, governance structures, organizational culture, and shared purpose. Its effectiveness is neither universal nor linear but is shaped by moderating conditions, institutional environments, stakeholder diversity, and the quality of collaborative interactions. This suggests that collaborative leadership should be understood as an ‘aesthetic whole’, where individual elements derive meaning and effectiveness through their interconnectedness rather than in isolation.

Moreover, this study has demonstrated that collaborative leadership has evolved beyond isolated theoretical foundations into a multidimensional leadership paradigm integrating relational, behavioural, structural, governance, and adaptive dimensions. However, the study also reveals considerable fragmentation in how collaborative leadership has been conceptualised, theorised, operationalised, and empirically investigated. Existing studies predominantly explain individual dimensions of collaborative leadership, for example, relational and collaborative governance (Xing et al., 2026), shared and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005; Xu et al., 2022), collaborative governance and cross-sector partnerships (Agranoff, 2007; Bryson et al., 2015), organisational behaviours and authentic relationships (Ang'ana et al., 2023), or adaptive organisational systems (van der Voet & Steijn, 2020; Moore et al., 2023). While these perspectives have substantially advanced collaborative leadership scholarship, they tend to examine these dimensions independently, providing only limited explanation of how they interact to produce collaborative leadership and its organisational outcomes.

Consequently, the findings of this study support the need for a more holistic conceptualisation that positions collaborative leadership as a dynamic organisational capability emerging through the continuous interaction of contextual conditions, relational processes, leadership behaviours, governance structures, and the lived experiences of organisational actors. Such a model moves beyond fragmented perspectives by providing a unified framework that captures both the complexity and contextual nature of collaborative leadership. Drawing from the synthesis of the research questions, this study proposes that collaborative leadership is a 'dynamic organisational capability through which

individuals, teams, organisations, and interorganisational networks collectively mobilise shared purpose, authentic relationships, distributed influence, coordinated action, and aesthetic experiences to address complex adaptive challenges and create sustainable organisational and societal value.’

This conceptualisation extends earlier definitions by integrating the relational foundations of collaborative leadership (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Ang’ana & Kilika, 2022), the collective agency emphasised in shared and distributed leadership (Spillane, 2005; Xu et al., 2022), the boundary-spanning orientation of collaborative governance (Agranoff, 2007; Bryson et al., 2015), and the adaptive logic of complexity-oriented leadership (van der Voet & Steijn, 2020; Moore et al., 2023). Unlike previous perspectives that primarily conceptualise collaborative leadership through structural arrangements, behavioural competencies, or governance mechanisms, the proposed definition recognises that collaborative leadership is also an aesthetic phenomenon through which organisational actors experience, interpret, and construct collaborative leadership (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023).

From an aesthetic perspective, collaborative leadership is not experienced solely through formal governance structures or observable leadership behaviours but also through the sensory, emotional, symbolic, and relational qualities that shape everyday collaborative interactions. These subtle yet powerful experiences influence how organisational members interpret trustworthiness, authenticity, reciprocity, belonging, and shared purpose, ultimately shaping their willingness to collaborate. Consequently, this study claims that collaborative leadership should be understood not only as what leaders and followers do together but also

as how collaboration is collectively experienced and given meaning within organisational life.

Further, this study suggests that aesthetic experiences constitute an important relational process through which collaborative leadership emerges and is sustained. First, sensory perception influences how organisations interpret leadership through verbal and non-verbal communication, physical presence, behavioural consistency, and the broader organisational environment. Second, empathy and relational connection enable leaders and constituents to perceive emotional climates, appreciate diverse perspectives, and cultivate authentic relationships that strengthen trust and mutual accountability (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022). Third, the everyday collaborative atmosphere, manifested through psychological safety, openness, respectful dialogue, transparency, and inclusive participation, creates the conditions within which collaboration can flourish or deteriorate. Finally, storytelling and organisational symbolism enable leaders to construct shared meaning through narratives, metaphors, rituals, vision, and symbolic actions that reinforce collective identity, organisational purpose, and collaborative commitment. These aesthetic dimensions complement existing behavioural and structural explanations by illuminating how collaborative leadership is emotionally experienced, socially interpreted, and continuously reproduced through everyday organisational interactions (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023).

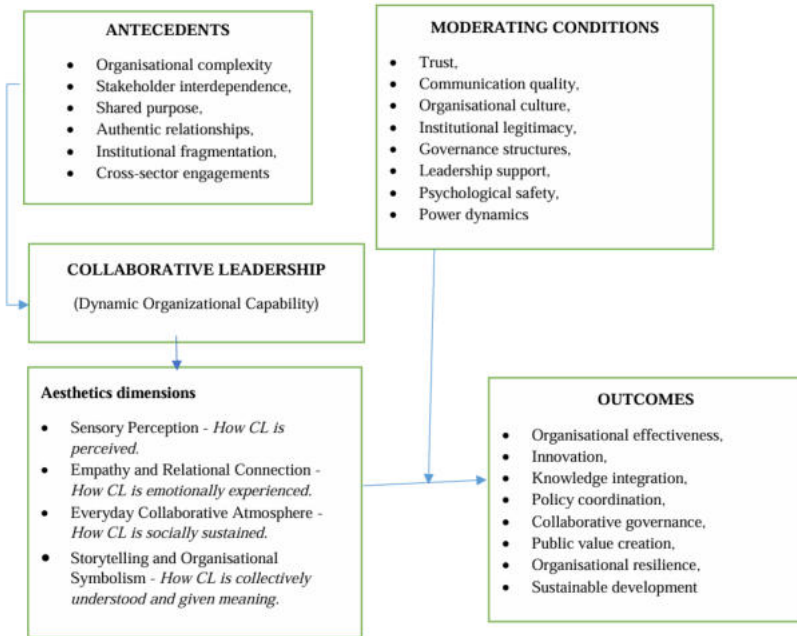
This study findings have also demonstrated that collaborative leadership does not emerge spontaneously. It develops through the interaction of contextual antecedents, collaborative processes, enabling conditions, and organisational outcomes. Organisational complexity, stakeholder interdependence, shared purpose, authentic relationships, institutional fragmentation, and

cross-sector collaboration consistently emerged as the principal antecedents of collaborative leadership (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015; Broadhurst et al., 2021; Christensen, 2024). These antecedents activate collaborative processes that are strengthened or constrained by moderating conditions including trust, communication quality, organisational culture, institutional legitimacy, governance structures, leadership support, psychological safety, and power dynamics (Ang'ana et al., 2023; North-Samardzic et al., 2023; Onyango, 2024). From an aesthetic perspective, these conditions also shape the emotional tone, symbolic meaning, and relational quality of collaborative interactions, thereby influencing whether collaboration is experienced as authentic, inclusive, empowering, and cohesive or as fragmented, exclusionary, and performative (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023).

These interacting structural, behavioural, relational, governance, and aesthetic mechanisms subsequently influence organisational effectiveness, innovation, knowledge integration, policy coordination, collaborative governance, public value creation, organisational resilience, and sustainable development outcomes (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015; Cristofoli et al., 2020; Muslim et al., 2022; Ang'ana, Ongeti, & Chiroma, 2023; Moore et al., 2023; Onyango, 2024). The proposed model therefore conceptualises collaborative leadership as an integrated system in which antecedents, enabling conditions, aesthetic experiences, and organisational outcomes continuously interact through recursive feedback relationships. The study proposed an Integrative Aesthetic Model of Collaborative Leadership (Figure 6) to provide a comprehensive explanation of how collaborative leadership emerges, evolves, and creates value within increasingly complex organisational environments.

Figure 6

An integrative aesthetic model of collaborative leadership



Source: Author (2026)

Building on the systematic synthesis of the literature, the model conceptualises collaborative leadership as an integrated system comprising contextual antecedents, enabling conditions, collaborative leadership processes, aesthetic experiences, and organisational outcomes (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023). While existing theories explain the structural, behavioural, relational, and governance dimensions of collaborative leadership, this model extends the literature by introducing four core aesthetic dimensions that explain how collaborative leadership is perceived, emotionally experienced, socially sustained, and collectively interpreted by organisational actors.

Specifically, the model proposes that collaborative leadership is experienced through sensory perception, empathy and relational connection, everyday collaborative atmosphere, and storytelling and organisational symbolism. The aesthetic dimensions of collaborative leadership are explained in Table 6.

Table 6

Aesthetic dimensions of collaborative leadership from study

Aesthetic Dimension	Definition	Observable Indicators (Measures)
Sensory Perception	The extent to which collaborative leadership is experienced through verbal, non-verbal, physical, and environmental cues that communicate openness, authenticity, and collaboration (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023)	• Leaders communicate with an open, respectful, and consistent tone of voice. • Positive and inclusive body language is consistently demonstrated during interactions. • Physical and virtual workspaces promote openness, accessibility, and collaboration. • Leaders' behaviours consistently align with their words, creating authenticity and credibility. • Meetings encourage active participation through inclusive communication practices.

Empathy and Relational Connection	The ability of leaders and collaborators to understand, appreciate, and respond to the emotions, perspectives, and needs of others while fostering authentic relationships (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023).	• Leaders actively listen and acknowledge diverse viewpoints. • Team members demonstrate mutual trust and psychological safety. • Individuals feel respected, valued, and included regardless of their role or status. • Conflicts are addressed through dialogue, empathy, and constructive engagement. • Collaborative relationships are characterised by mutual accountability and reciprocity.
Everyday Collaborative Atmosphere	The shared emotional and cultural climate that shapes everyday collaborative experiences through trust, openness, inclusion, and collective responsibility (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023).	• Team members freely share ideas without fear of criticism or retaliation. • Decision-making processes are transparent and participatory. • Collaboration is characterised by openness, fairness, and mutual respect. • Organisational culture encourages experimentation, learning, and innovation. • Teams experience a strong sense of belonging and shared ownership of outcomes.

Storytelling and Organisational Symbolism	The use of narratives, metaphors, rituals, symbols, and shared experiences to create meaning, reinforce organisational identity, and sustain collaborative purpose (Hansen et al., 2007; Duhamel et al., 2023; Ladkin, 2023).	• Leaders regularly communicate compelling stories that reinforce the organisation's shared purpose. • Organisational symbols, rituals, and traditions strengthen collaborative identity. • Successes and failures are openly shared as collective learning experiences. • Leaders use metaphors, vision, and symbolic actions to inspire collective action. • Team members demonstrate a shared understanding of organisational values and mission through everyday behaviours.
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Source: Author (2026)

The proposed model gives rise to three propositions that provide a foundation for future empirical testing.

Proposition 1

Collaborative leadership emerges as a dynamic organisational capability through the integration of transformational, shared, collaborative governance, and complexity leadership perspectives, and is experienced through the aesthetic dimensions of sensory perception, empathy and relational connection, everyday collaborative atmosphere, and storytelling and organisational symbolism.

The study has demonstrated that no single leadership theory sufficiently explains collaborative leadership. Rather, collaborative leadership represents an integrative capability in which transformational leadership contributes relational influence, shared vision, and collective purpose (Rost, 1991); shared and distributed leadership contribute collective agency and distributed expertise (Spillane, 2006; Xu et al., 2022); collaborative governance contributes boundary spanning, stakeholder coordination, and shared accountability (Agranoff, 2007; Bryson et al., 2015); while complexity leadership explains adaptation within dynamic and uncertain organisational environments (van der Voet & Steijn, 2020; Moore et al., 2023). The review further suggests that these structural and behavioural processes become meaningful only when organisational members experience collaborative leadership through authentic interactions, emotional connection, supportive collaborative environments, and shared organisational meaning.

Propositions 2

The effectiveness of collaborative leadership is contingent upon trust, communication quality, organisational culture, institutional legitimacy, governance structures, leadership support, and the extent to which organisational actors experience psychologically safe, emotionally connected, and symbolically meaningful collaborative environments.

The study findings have demonstrated that antecedents explain why collaborative leadership emerges, whereas enabling conditions determine whether collaborative initiatives flourish or fail across different organisational contexts. Organisational complexity, stakeholder interdependence, cross-sector collaboration, institutional fragmentation, and shared purpose create the need for collaborative leadership, while trust, communication quality,

organisational culture, governance structures, leadership support, and institutional legitimacy determine its effectiveness (Bryson et al., 2015; Cristofoli et al., 2020; Ang'ana et al., 2023; Xing et al., 2026). Extending these findings, the proposed model argues that collaborative leadership is also shaped by the quality of everyday aesthetic experiences. Collaboration is strengthened when organisational members perceive authentic and consistent leadership behaviours (sensory perception), develop meaningful interpersonal relationships (empathy and relational connection), experience inclusive and psychologically safe workplaces (everyday collaborative atmosphere), and identify with shared narratives, values, and organisational symbols (storytelling and organisational symbolism). Consequently, collaborative leadership should be understood as contingent not only upon structural and organisational conditions but also upon how collaboration is experienced by those engaged in it.

Proposition 3

Collaborative leadership positively influences organisational, governance, and societal outcomes through positive aesthetic experiences.

The study findings associate collaborative leadership with improved organisational performance, innovation, educational improvement, policy implementation, governance effectiveness, public value creation, and sustainable development (Hallinger & Heck, 2010a; Cristofoli et al., 2020; Muslim et al., 2022; Onyango, 2024). These outcomes arise because collaborative leadership enables knowledge integration, distributed decision-making, coordinated action, and collective problem-solving across multiple stakeholders. However, the proposed model argues that these outcomes are equally influenced by how collaborative leadership is experienced by organisational actors. Positive sensory cues, empathetic

relationships, inclusive collaborative atmospheres, and meaningful organisational stories and symbols strengthen trust, psychological safety, collective identity, and shared purpose, thereby reinforcing commitment to collaborative action. Accordingly, the proposed model positions aesthetics not as an additional leadership attribute but as the experiential mechanism through which collaborative leadership is perceived, socially sustained, and translated into meaningful organisational, governance, and societal outcomes.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that collaborative leadership has evolved from a fragmented and emerging concept into an increasingly mature and multidisciplinary field of leadership scholarship. Synthesising evidence published between 1990 and 2026 reveals that collaborative leadership has progressively shifted from normative discussions of participation and partnership to a more comprehensive leadership paradigm capable of explaining how organisations, institutions, and cross-sector networks collectively respond to complexity, interdependence, and shared responsibility. Despite this significant progress, the review also demonstrates that collaborative leadership remains characterised by conceptual ambiguity, fragmented theoretical foundations, inconsistent measurement approaches, and limited empirical integration. Addressing these challenges is essential if collaborative leadership is to progress from a promising interdisciplinary concept to a coherent and cumulative body of scientific knowledge.

Therefore, this study makes several important contributions to collaborative leadership scholarship. First, it traces the historical

evolution and conceptual development of collaborative leadership over the past three decades. Second, it integrates the diverse theoretical perspectives underpinning collaborative leadership by demonstrating how transformational leadership, shared and distributed leadership, collaborative governance, and complexity leadership collectively contribute to understanding collaborative leadership as a multidimensional organisational capability. Third, the review synthesises existing evidence relating to the conceptualisation, measurement, antecedents, contextual influences, and organisational outcomes of collaborative leadership while identifying important theoretical and methodological gaps that continue to shape the field. Finally, and most importantly, the review advances scholarship by proposing an Integrative Aesthetic Model of Collaborative Leadership, which extends existing structural, behavioural, relational, governance, and adaptive perspectives by incorporating the experiential dimensions through which collaborative leadership is perceived, emotionally experienced, socially sustained, and collectively understood.

The proposed aesthetic perspective argues that collaborative leadership is shaped by how collaborative leadership is experienced by organisational actors. Specifically, the model identifies sensory perception, empathy and relational connection, everyday collaborative atmosphere, and storytelling and organisational symbolism as four interrelated aesthetic dimensions that explain how trust, belonging, authenticity, psychological safety, shared meaning, and collective commitment emerge within collaborative relationships. By integrating these experiential dimensions into collaborative leadership theory, the review offers a richer and more holistic understanding of how collaborative leadership develops, functions, and creates value across diverse organisational settings.

Beyond its theoretical contribution, the review also highlights the growing practical significance of collaborative leadership in addressing many of the defining challenges confronting contemporary organisations and societies. Digital transformation, artificial intelligence, climate change, institutional reform, sustainable development, cross-sector collaboration, and increasingly networked forms of governance all require leadership approaches capable of mobilising collective intelligence, fostering innovation, strengthening adaptive capacity, and generating public value. The findings therefore suggest that collaborative leadership should no longer be viewed as an alternative leadership style but rather as a strategic organisational capability that enables individuals, teams, organisations, and governance systems to collectively address complex adaptive challenges.

The future of collaborative leadership is not about how effectively leaders coordinate people and processes, but by how meaningfully they cultivate shared experiences, authentic relationships, and collective purpose within increasingly complex organisational systems. The Integrative Aesthetic Model proposed in this review provides one step toward that objective by offering a conceptual foundation through which future research can examine not only how collaborative leadership is enacted, but also how it is perceived, experienced, sustained, and translated into meaningful organisational and societal outcomes.

FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

The findings of this study suggest that collaborative leadership has reached a stage of theoretical maturity that warrants a transition from conceptual proliferation to theoretical integration. Although collaborative leadership is consistently portrayed as a

relational, collective, and adaptive leadership paradigm, its theoretical foundations remain fragmented across transformational leadership, shared and distributed leadership, collaborative governance, and complexity leadership traditions (Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Agranoff, 2007; Bryson et al., 2015; Xing et al., 2026). Future research should therefore move beyond examining these perspectives independently toward developing and empirically testing integrative theoretical frameworks that explain how these complementary traditions collectively shape collaborative leadership across individual, team, organisational, inter-organisational, governance, and societal levels. Such efforts should also establish clearer conceptual boundaries that distinguish collaborative leadership from adjacent constructs, including shared, distributed, collective, participatory, and relational leadership, thereby strengthening theoretical precision and cumulative knowledge development.

A second priority concerns the operationalisation and measurement of collaborative leadership. The review revealed considerable inconsistency in construct definitions, operationalisations, and measurement approaches, limiting comparability across studies and organisational contexts. Future research should therefore focus on developing and validating multidimensional measurement instruments capable of capturing the behavioural, relational, structural, governance, and adaptive dimensions of collaborative leadership. Building on the proposed Integrative Aesthetic Model of Collaborative Leadership, future scale development should also incorporate the four core aesthetic dimensions identified in this review; sensory perception, empathy and relational connection, everyday collaborative atmosphere, and storytelling and organisational symbolism. These dimensions offer a novel avenue

for measuring how collaborative leadership is perceived, emotionally experienced, socially sustained, and collectively understood within organisations. Empirical validation of these dimensions across diverse organisational settings would significantly advance collaborative leadership measurement and theory development.

Third, future scholarship should seek to empirically validate the integrative conceptual model proposed in this review. While the systematic synthesis identified organisational complexity, stakeholder interdependence, institutional fragmentation, and shared purpose as key antecedents of collaborative leadership, further research is needed to explain how these antecedents interact with enabling conditions to produce collaborative leadership outcomes. Particular attention should be directed toward examining the moderating roles of trust, communication quality, organisational culture, governance structures, institutional legitimacy, leadership support, psychological safety, and power dynamics in shaping collaborative leadership effectiveness (Ang'ana et al., 2023; Gafur et al., 2023; Müller & Van Esch, 2020). Longitudinal, multilevel, and mixed-methods research designs are especially needed to investigate how collaborative leadership develops over time, evolves across organisational life cycles, and influences organisational, governance, and societal outcomes under varying contextual conditions.

The aesthetic perspective introduced in this review also opens a significant new research frontier. Existing collaborative leadership scholarship has predominantly examined leadership through structural, behavioural, and relational lenses, paying comparatively little attention to how collaboration is experienced by organisational actors. Future research should therefore investigate the experiential dimensions of collaborative leadership by

examining how sensory perception, empathy, organisational atmosphere, storytelling, and symbolic practices shape trust, collective identity, psychological safety, belonging, and shared meaning. Researchers should also explore whether these aesthetic dimensions mediate or strengthen the relationships between collaborative leadership and organisational outcomes. Such investigations would contribute to a more holistic understanding of collaborative leadership by integrating cognitive, behavioural, emotional, and symbolic dimensions into existing theoretical models.

Finally, collaborative leadership research must continue to respond to rapidly evolving organisational and societal contexts. Emerging challenges associated with artificial intelligence, digital transformation, virtual and hybrid work, digital governance, platform organisations, and data-driven decision-making present important opportunities for extending collaborative leadership theory (Aryee et al., 2025; Christensen, 2024; Xing et al., 2026). Future studies should examine how collaborative leadership operates within technology-enabled environments and whether digital platforms strengthen or weaken collaboration, trust, inclusion, and collective decision-making. Equally important is expanding collaborative leadership research within Africa and the broader Global South, where distinctive institutional environments, governance systems, cultural values, and developmental priorities provide opportunities to generate grounded theories that extend the predominantly Western literature. Such scholarship would not only enrich collaborative leadership theory but also contribute practical insights for advancing the scholarship, the Sustainable Development Goals, and broader efforts to strengthen collaborative governance in Africa.

REFLEXIVITY

As the primary researcher, I acknowledge that systematic literature reviews involve interpretive judgement in the identification, selection, synthesis, and interpretation of evidence. Given my academic interest in collaborative leadership and prior scholarship in this field, I remained conscious of the potential influence of my theoretical perspectives throughout the review process. To enhance trustworthiness, the review followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines and the SPAR-4-SLR framework, employed predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, documented all study selection decisions, and incorporated an independent review of article eligibility to strengthen inter-rater reliability. Throughout the synthesis, I sought to critically engage with both convergent and divergent perspectives, allowing the evidence rather than prior assumptions to guide the development of the proposed Integrative Aesthetic Model of Collaborative Leadership. Consequently, the model presented represents an evidence-informed conceptual synthesis grounded in the reviewed literature rather than a confirmation of pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

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APPENDIX

Table 7

List of the final 62 publications used in analysis

	Publication Year	Author	Title
1	2024	Abdelwahab Ibrahim El-Sayed, A., Shaheen, R. S., & Farghaly Abdelaliem, S. M	Collaborative leadership and productive work performance: The mediating role of nurses' innovative behaviour. <i>International nursing review</i> , 71(4), 868–878
2	2007	Agranoff, R	Managing within networks: Adding value to public organizations. Georgetown University Press
3	2024	Al-Khayari, N. M., Yousefi, M., & Aigbogun, O	A predictive model for collaborative leadership in digital transformation: Does it make a difference in Oman's e- government performance? <i>Foresight</i> , 26(5), 775–792
4	2021	Ang'ana, G. A., & Chiroma, J. A	Collaborative Leadership and its Influence in Building and Sustaining Successful Cross- Functional Relationships in Organizations in Kenya. <i>IOSR Journal of Business and Management</i> , 23(8), 18–26
5	2022	Ang'ana, G. A., & Kilika, J. M	Collaborative Leadership in an Organizational Context: A Research Agenda. <i>Journal of Human Resource & Leadership</i> , 6(1), 48–71

6	2023	Ang'ana, G. A., Ongeti, W. J., & Chiroma, J. A	Conceptualizing and Measuring Collaborative Leadership in an Organizational Context. <i>Journal of Human Resource & Leadership</i> , 7(6), 101–129
7	2025	Aryee, J. N., Davies, P., Torsah, G. A., Apaw, M. M., Boateng, C. D., Mwando, S. M., Kwisanga, C., Jobunga, E., & Amekudzi, L. K	Building Capacity for Artificial Intelligence in Africa: A Cross-Country Survey of Challenges and Governance Pathways. <i>ArXiv</i>
8	2023	Begeç, S., & Akyuz, G. A	Requirements of collaborative and transformational leadership in digital ecosystems: techno-orchestrating leaders in a vuca world. <i>Revista De Administração De Empresas</i> , 63(5), e2022–0155
9	2010	Bingham, L. B., & Choi, Y	Teaching Collaborative Leadership: Ideas and Lessons for the Field. <i>Journal of Public Affairs Education</i>
10	2005	Bingham, L. B., & Nabatchi, T	The New Governance: Practices and Processes for Stakeholder and Citizen Participation in the Work of Government. <i>Public Administration Review</i> , 65(5), 547-558
11	2021	Broadhurst, K., Ferreira, J., & Berkeley, N	Collaborative leadership and place-based development. <i>Local Economy</i>

12	2015	Bryson, J. M., Crosby, B. C., & Stone, M. M	Designing and Implementing Cross-Sector Collaborations: Needed and Challenging. <i>Public Administration Review</i> , 75(5), 647-663
13	2026	Cheboi, A. K., Hawke, J., Abualfatah, H., Sutjahjo, A., Cerigo, D. B., Olpengs, R., & OBrien, W.	Human-AI Collaboration in Conflict Analysis: Text Classifier Development with Peacebuilders. <i>ArXiv</i>
14	1994	Chrislip, D.D., & Larson, C.E	Collaborative Leadership: How Citizens and Civic Leaders Can Make a Difference. Jossey-Bass
15	2024	Christensen, I	Understanding Tradeoffs in the Institutional Design and Leadership of Collaborative Governance. <i>Public Performance & Management Review</i> , 47(2), 263–290
16	2020	Cristofoli, D., Trivellato, B., Sancino, A., Macciò, L., & Marković, J	Public network leadership and the ties that lead. <i>Journal of Management & Governance</i> , 25(1), 251–274
17	2005	Crosby, B. C., & Bryson, J. M	Leadership for the common good: tackling public problems in a shared-power world (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass
18	2024	Curseu, P. L. & Schruijer, S. G. L	Leading without position power: preliminary validation of the multiparty collaborative leadership scale (MCLS). <i>International Journal of Conflict</i>

			Management, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 411-426
19	2021	Döös, M., & Wilhelmson, L	Fifty-five years of managerial shared leadership research: A review of an empirical field. Leadership
20	2025	Egitim, S	Collaborative leadership in English language classrooms: engaging learners in leaderful classroom practices and strategies. International Journal of Leadership in Education, 28(1), 32–52
21	2000	Emihovich, C., & Battaglia, C	Creating cultures for collaborative inquiry: new challenges for school leaders. International Journal of Leadership in Education, 3(3), 225–238
22	2019	Endres, S., & Weibler, J	Understanding (non)leadership phenomena in collaborative interorganizational networks and advancing shared leadership theory: an interpretive grounded theory study. Bur - Business Research, 13(1), 275–309
23	1977	Finch, F. E	Collaborative Leadership in Work Settings. The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science
24	1994	Finley, N. E	Leadership: The Collaborative Process. Journal of Leadership Studies

25	2022	Fournier, P., Moisan, L., & Lagacé, D	Seizing the opportunity: the emergence of shared leadership during the deployment of an integrated performance management system. <i>BMC Health Services Research</i> , 22(1)
26	2026	Friedrich, J., Kark, R., & Preser, R	Who Gets to Lead Together? Considering the Uneven Terrains in Shared and Collective Leadership. <i>Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies</i>
27	2023	Gafur, A., Mappasere, F. A., Parawu, H. E., Nasrulhaq, Fatmawati, F., & Samad, M. A	Collaborative Leadership in Waste Management: A Case Study of Watampone City, Indonesia. <i>Public Governance Administration and Finances Law Review</i> , 8(2), 109–124
28	2013	Getha-Taylor, H., & Morse, R. S	Collaborative leadership development for local government officials: Exploring competencies and program impact. <i>Public Administration Quarterly</i> , 37 (1)
29	2022	Hafeez, A & Akhtar, N	Collaborative leadership style on school improvement a case of secondary education sector. <i>Journal of Positive School Psychology</i> , 6(9) 3460-3474
30	2010a	Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H.	Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010a). Collaborative leadership and school improvement: understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning. <i>School</i>

			Leadership & Management, 30(2), 95–110
31	2010b	Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H.	Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. H. (2010b). Leadership for Learning: Does Collaborative Leadership Make a Difference in School Improvement? Educational Management Administration & Leadership
32	2020	Herrera-Pastor, D., Juárez, J., & Ruiz-Román, C	Collaborative leadership to subvert marginalisation: the workings of a socio-educational network in Los Asperones, Spain. School Leadership & Management, 40(2–3), 203–220
33	1994	Kanter, R.M	Collaborative advantage: The art of alliances. Harvard Business Review, 72, 96-108
34	2018	Kim, J	Collaborative leadership and financial sustainability in local government. Local Government Studies, 44(6), 874–893
35	1997	Kochanowski, Y. J	Collaborative Leadership: Using the Involution Revolution™ to Improve Decisions. Home Health Care Management & Practice
36	2018	Kristin, C	Collaborative Leadership: Cultivating an Environment for Success. Collaborative Librarianship, 10(2); Article 4
37	2023	Ladkin, D	Aesthetic leadership. In The SAGE encyclopedia of

			leadership studies (Vol. 2, pp. -). SAGE Publications, Inc.,
38	1990	Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D	Transformational Leadership: How Principals Can Help Reform School Cultures. <i>School Effectiveness and School Improvement</i> , 1(4), 249–280
39	2018	Lim, L	Collaborative Leadership: Six Influences That Matter Most. <i>Leadership and Policy in Schools</i> , 17(1), 164–166
40	2019	Maalouf, G. Y	Effects of collaborative leadership on organizational performance. <i>International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development</i> , Volume 6, Issue 1, Pages 138-144
41	2023	Moore, J., Elliott, I. C., & Hesselgreaves, H	Collaborative Leadership in Integrated Care Systems; Creating Leadership for the Common Good. <i>Journal of Change Management</i> , 23(4), 358–373
42	2023	Mukua-Marua, J., Linge, T., & Ouma, C	Influence of Collaboration of Team Leadership on Team Effectiveness of Collaborative Partnerships in International Research Organizations in Kenya. <i>The University Journal</i> , 5(3), 31–50
43	2000	Mullen, C. A., & Kochan, F. K	Creating a collaborative leadership network: an organic view of change. <i>International Journal of Leadership in Education</i> , 3(3), 183–200

44	2020	Müller, H., & Van Esch, F. A. W. J	Collaborative leadership in EMU governance: a matter of cognitive proximity. <i>West European Politics</i> , 43(5), 1117–1140
45	2020	Müller, H., & Van Esch, F. A. W. J	Collaborative leadership in EMU governance: a matter of cognitive proximity. <i>West European Politics</i> , 43(5), 1117–1140
46	2022	Muslim, M. A., Prasojo, E., & Salomo, R. V	Leadership and Collaborative Governance in transition era from Millennium Development Goals to Sustainable Development Goals: A Systematic Mapping Study. <i>RUDN Journal Of Public Administration</i> , 9(2), 172-188
47	2016	Nkengbeza, D., Ayehsabun, A. P., & L. Ntabi, M	Collaborative leadership in skills development: Getting the fundamentals right. <i>Open Science Journal</i> , 1(4)
48	2023	North-Samardzic, A., Kan, M., & Edwards, G	Leadership by cavea: The social processes of interorganisational collaborative leadership. <i>Journal of Management & Organization</i> , 30(4), 1119–1135
49	2009	O’Leary, R., & Bingham, L. B. (Eds.)	The Collaborative Public Manager: New Ideas for the Twenty-first Century. Georgetown University Press
50	2024	Onyango, G	Social Processes of Public Sector Collaborations in Kenya: Unpacking Challenges of Realising Joint Actions in Public

			Administration. Journal of the Knowledge Economy, 16(2), 8141–8171
51	2025	Pearce, C. L	Shared leadership: vertical leadership dynamics in teams. Organizational Psychology Review
52	2019	Petricević, O., & Teece, D. J	The structural reshaping of globalization: Implications for strategic sectors, profiting from innovation, and the multinational enterprise. Journal of International Business Studies, 50(9), 1487–1512
53	2025	Ridlo, W., Sofiana, A. N., & Sabarudin, S	Collaborative Leadership as a Catalyst in Optimizing the Quality of Education at Elementary School. Edunesia. Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan, 6(3), 1346–1362
54	1991	Rost, J	Leadership for the Twenty-First Century. Bloomsbury Academic
55	2020	Schlebusch, G. J	Collaborative Leadership and Sustained Learner Academic Performance in Secondary Schools: A Blaming Game? Africa Education Review, 17(3), 74–89
56	2011	Silvia, C	Collaborative Governance Concepts for Successful Network Leadership. State and Local Government Review

57	2005	Spillane, J. P	Distributed Leadership. The Educational Forum, 69(2), 143–150
58	2020	van der Voet, J., & Steijn, B	Team innovation through collaboration: how visionary leadership spurs innovation via team cohesion. Public Management Review, 23(9), 1275–1294
59	2023	Vuchkovski, D., Zalaznik, M., Mitreğa, M., & Pfajfar, G	A look at the future of work: The digital transformation of teams from conventional to virtual. Journal of Business Research, 163, 113912
60	2018	Wilson, K	Collaborative leadership in public library service development. Library Management, Vol. 39 No. 8-9 pp. 518–529
61	2026	Xing, H., Luo, L., & Feng, B	Lead by Relationship: The Behaviors of Relational Leadership in Regional Collaborative Governance. Systems, 14(1), 95
62	2022	Xu, N., Ghahremani, H., Lemoine, G. J., & Tesluk, P. E	Emergence of shared leadership networks in teams: An adaptive process perspective. The Leadership Quarterly, 33(6), 101588

Source: Reviewed data (2026)

Figure 1

Systematic literature review protocol



Source: Author (2026)

THE MISSING LINK IN THE IMPLEMENTATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGY AND CHANGE INITIATIVES IN AFRICAN HEALTH SYSTEMS: COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

Theresia M. Mutetei

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-4115-3121>

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ABSTRACT

Innovative technologies and organizational change are increasingly important for strengthening African health systems; however, successful adoption does not necessarily result in sustained implementation. Collaborative leadership may facilitate implementation by promoting stakeholder participation, shared decision-making, communication, coordination, ownership, and institutional integration. This systematic review examined the role of collaborative leadership in implementing and sustaining innovative technology and change initiatives in African health systems. A systematic review was conducted following PRISMA 2020 guidelines. Empirical qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies published between January 2016 and July 2026 were searched across PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, Emerald Insight, African Journal Online, and Google Scholar. Studies examining collaborative leadership in

relation to implementation or sustainability of health technology and organizational change in Africa were eligible. Methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool. Findings were synthesized narratively and thematically. Of 378 records identified, 56 studies met the eligibility criteria. Stakeholder engagement was reported in 75.0% of studies, communication and shared vision in 67.9%, participatory decision-making in 62.5%, interprofessional collaboration in 57.1%, and partnerships in 51.8%. Collaborative leadership was associated with improved stakeholder and workforce engagement (69.6%), implementation coordination (66.1%), technology acceptance or adoption (60.7%), and contextual adaptation (55.4%). Sustainability was addressed in 73.2% of studies, with sustained leadership commitment (62.5%), local ownership (58.9%), health-system integration (53.6%), and sustainable financing (50.0%) emerging as important determinants. Major barriers included infrastructure limitations (67.9%), financial constraints (60.7%), workforce limitations (55.4%), and leadership and governance weaknesses (51.8%). Collaborative leadership is important for translating health innovation into sustained health-system change in Africa. Sustainable implementation requires stakeholder engagement, shared decision-making, workforce capacity, local ownership, institutional integration, adequate infrastructure, supportive governance, and recurrent financing. African health systems should therefore adopt collaborative, system-centred approaches that embed innovation within routine structures and strengthen institutional ownership.

Keywords: *Africa; collaborative leadership; digital health; implementation; health innovation; health systems; sustainability*

INTRODUCTION

Technological innovation and organizational change are increasingly central to health-system strengthening, particularly as countries seek to improve healthcare access, quality, efficiency, resilience, and progress toward universal health coverage post the Covid-19 pandemic (Moore et al, 2023). Digital technologies such as electronic health records (EHRs), electronic medical records (EMRs), telemedicine, mobile health (mHealth), artificial intelligence (AI), health information systems, digital diagnostics, remote monitoring, and data analytics are transforming clinical and managerial processes (The World Health Organization, WHO, 2021) identifies digital transformation as an important component of equitable, efficient, sustainable, and people-centered health systems. As posited by Moore et al (2023), global communities were faced with a collaborative leadership deficiency in the face of the novel corona virus. Post-covid-19 economies are still grappling this challenge especially in the health sector. Exact literature points to growing global networks in all sectors of the economy, and in particular health. Jung and Sosik (2002) and Ang'ana & Kilika, (2022) proposes that many global organizations are struggling because they have not effectively transitioned from traditional management and leadership approach to contemporary shared, collaborative leadership approach. This has resulted in the sustained adoption of poor and ineffective business models (Ang'ana & Kilika, 2022; Jung & Sosik, 2002; Goleman and Boyatzis, 2013; Maak & Pless, 2006) leading to poor organizational performance.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, digital technologies have been deployed for clinical care, health information management, disease surveillance, patient communication, professional support, and

remote service delivery, creating opportunities to overcome geographical, workforce, and information constraints (Karamagi et al., 2022; Agbeyangi & Lukose, 2025). Despite these opportunities, adoption of technology does not necessarily translate into successful implementation or sustained health-system transformation. Karamagi et al. (2022) identified extensive digital-health activity across sub-Saharan Africa but reported persistent fragmentation, unequal investment, weak coordination, and challenges related to integration, scalability, and sustainability. Telemedicine implementation in South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria has similarly been affected by inadequate infrastructure, connectivity, financing, workforce capacity, digital literacy, and regulatory environments (Agbeyangi & Lukose, 2025). Evidence from public-sector health facilities in Kenya further demonstrates that sustainable EMR implementation requires more than installation of technology; leadership sensitization, user training, multidisciplinary implementation teams, technical coordination, infrastructure support, data-quality mechanisms, and continuous improvement (Kang'a et al., 2017). These challenges demonstrate that health innovation is simultaneously a technological, organizational, workforce, governance, and leadership process.

The complexity of health innovation, however, means that leadership cannot depend exclusively on hierarchical authority. Implementation commonly involves healthcare managers, clinicians, nurses, information technology personnel, policymakers, government agencies, communities, patients, development partners, academic institutions, and private technology providers. Collaborative leadership provides a mechanism through which these stakeholders can develop shared priorities, participate in decision-making, exchange knowledge, coordinate resources,

address implementation barriers, and assume collective responsibility for change. Inclusive leadership research emphasizes the importance of belonging, recognition of diverse contributions, and participation in organizational processes (Randel et al., 2018), while psychological safety enables team members to communicate concerns, identify problems, and contribute ideas without fear of interpersonal consequences (Edmondson, 1999).

Collaborative leadership (CL) has been conceptualized in dimensions way by different scholars (Ang'ana et al., 2023). The common convergence is that collaborative leaders work alongside teams as facilitators rather than authority figures to solve complex challenges. Hence CL may be particularly important for moving innovations from initial adoption toward integration, scale-up, institutionalization, and sustainability. Sustainable implementation requires technologies and change initiatives to become embedded within routine organizational structures rather than remaining dependent on temporary projects, external financing, or individual champions.

Despite growing literature on digital health, implementation, and healthcare leadership, evidence specifically linking collaborative leadership to implementation and sustainability of innovative technology and change initiatives across African health systems remains fragmented. Existing African reviews have largely focused on digital-health interventions, telemedicine, infrastructure, workforce capacity, technological adoption, and implementation barriers (Karamagi et al., 2022; Agbeyangi & Lukose, 2025), while healthcare leadership literature has primarily examined implementation leadership, leadership styles, employee engagement, empowerment, and organizational outcomes (Castiglione, 2020; Specchia et al., 2021; Aboramadan et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a need to synthesize how collaborative

mechanisms—including stakeholder engagement, shared decision making, communication, interprofessional collaboration, partnerships, empowerment, and shared accountability—contribute to implementation and long-term sustainability of health innovation in African contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic literature review design to synthesize evidence on the role of collaborative leadership in the implementation and sustainability of innovative technology and change initiatives in African health systems. The review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines to promote transparency, methodological rigor, reproducibility, and comprehensive reporting of the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies (Page et al., 2021). A systematic literature review approach was considered appropriate because evidence concerning collaborative leadership, health innovation, implementation, and sustainability is distributed across different healthcare settings, countries, disciplines, and methodological traditions.

The review covered empirical studies published between January 2016 and July 2026, thereby capturing evidence generated during a decade characterized by rapid expansion of digital health, technological innovation, organizational transformation, and health-system reforms in Africa. The review setting comprised African health systems at national, subnational, organizational, facility, and programme levels. Studies conducted in hospitals, primary healthcare facilities, community health programmes, public health agencies, ministries and departments of health, and

other healthcare organizations were considered where they examined collaborative leadership in relation to implementation or sustainability of technology and change initiatives.

The review incorporated quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies to accommodate the multidimensional nature of collaborative leadership and innovation implementation. This approach enabled consideration of measurable implementation and sustainability outcomes alongside stakeholder experiences, organizational processes, leadership practices, and contextual factors. The review was guided by the PICO framework, where the population/context (P) comprised African health systems, healthcare organizations, and stakeholders implementing innovative technology or change initiatives; the intervention/exposure (I) comprised collaborative leadership and associated practices; the comparison (C), where available, consisted of hierarchical, non-collaborative, or less participatory leadership approaches; and the outcomes (O) comprised adoption, implementation success, stakeholder acceptance, scale-up, integration, institutionalization, continuity, and sustainability of technology and change initiatives.

A structured study-selection process was undertaken. Records identified through database searches were screened initially by title and abstract, followed by full-text assessment against predetermined eligibility criteria. Reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were documented, and the overall selection process was presented using a PRISMA flow diagram (Page et al., 2021). Participants represented stakeholders involved in the planning, implementation, management, utilization, governance, or sustainability of innovative technology and organizational change initiatives within African health systems. These included healthcare professionals such as physicians, nurses, clinical officers, pharmacists, laboratory personnel, and other health

workers; hospital and health facility managers; health-system administrators; policymakers; programme managers; information and communication technology personnel; digital health specialists; government officials; community health personnel; patients and community representatives; development partners; technology providers; and other stakeholders involved in health-system innovation.

Collaborative leadership was conceptualized broadly to include leadership approaches characterized by shared decision-making, stakeholder engagement, collective problem-solving, distributed responsibility, interprofessional collaboration, interorganizational partnerships, shared accountability, participatory governance, communication, trust, and development of shared goals among stakeholders involved in innovation and change.

Data Sources and Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was undertaken across databases covering health sciences, organizational leadership, management, and African research. The principal electronic databases included PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, Emerald Insight, African Journals Online (AJOL), and Google Scholar. The use of multiple databases was intended to capture interdisciplinary evidence because collaborative leadership and health technology implementation are studied across health sciences, management, organizational behaviour, information systems, and implementation science.

Search strings were adapted to the indexing requirements and controlled vocabulary of individual databases, including Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) where applicable. Boolean operators,

phrase searching, truncation, and database-specific filters were used to maximize sensitivity while maintaining relevance. Searches were restricted to studies published between 2016 and 2026 and to English-language publications.

Cross-study comparisons were undertaken to identify patterns and differences across health-system settings and African regions. Where evidence permitted, comparisons were also made between government-led and externally supported initiatives, facility and system-level interventions, urban and rural settings, and different leadership approaches. Quantitative findings were summarized descriptively using frequencies, proportions, effect estimates, or other reported measures where appropriate. A meta-analysis was to be considered only where a sufficiently homogeneous group of studies reported comparable leadership exposures, comparators, and implementation or sustainability outcomes. Where substantial clinical, methodological, or conceptual heterogeneity was present, statistical pooling was not undertaken.

Risk of Bias and Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of the 56 studies included in the review was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT). The MMAT was considered appropriate because the review incorporated qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies and therefore required an appraisal approach capable of evaluating different methodological designs using design-specific criteria. Quality assessment was undertaken to establish the methodological strengths and limitations of the included evidence and to guide interpretation of the findings rather than to generate a single overall numerical quality score.

All included studies were first considered against the MMAT screening questions concerning whether the research questions were clearly stated and whether the data collected were adequate to address those questions. Thereafter, studies were assessed according to the criteria applicable to their respective methodological designs. The 23 qualitative studies were assessed for appropriateness of the qualitative approach and data-collection methods, adequacy of derivation and interpretation of findings from the data, and coherence between data sources, collection, analysis, and interpretation. The 19 quantitative studies were assessed according to their specific quantitative designs, with attention to sampling and representativeness, appropriateness of measurements, completeness of outcome data, potential confounding, intervention or exposure integrity where applicable, and appropriateness of statistical analysis. The 14 mixed-methods studies were assessed for the justification for using mixed methods, effective integration of qualitative and quantitative components, interpretation of integrated findings, management of inconsistencies between components, and methodological quality of each component.

Overall, the methodological quality of the included evidence was moderate to high. Of the 56 studies, 37 (66.1%) met four or five of the applicable MMAT criteria and were considered to have high methodological quality, 15 (26.8%) met three criteria and were considered to have moderate methodological quality, while 4 (7.1%) demonstrated substantial methodological limitations. The most consistent strengths were clearly stated research questions, appropriate study designs, use of data-collection methods aligned with the research objectives, and adequate coherence between reported findings and study data.

Among the qualitative studies, 17 of 23 (73.9%) demonstrated high methodological quality, with particularly strong performance in the appropriateness of qualitative approaches and consistency between data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Four studies (17.4%) were of moderate quality, while two (8.7%) had substantial limitations. The principal concerns related to insufficient description of analytical procedures, limited justification of sampling approaches, and inadequate consideration of researcher influence on data collection and interpretation.

Among the quantitative studies, 11 of 19 (57.9%) demonstrated high methodological quality, 6 (31.6%) were of moderate quality, and 2 (10.5%) had substantial limitations. Common methodological strengths included appropriate outcome measures and alignment between study objectives and analytical approaches. However, some studies had limitations related to representativeness of samples, incomplete adjustment for potential confounding factors, and reliance on cross-sectional designs, which restricted causal interpretation of associations between leadership practices and implementation outcomes.

Of the 14 mixed-methods studies, 9 (64.3%) demonstrated high methodological quality and 5 (35.7%) were of moderate quality. None demonstrated limitations sufficient to substantially weaken confidence in the overall study findings. The main strengths were the complementary use of qualitative and quantitative evidence and the ability to examine both implementation outcomes and stakeholder experiences. The most frequent limitation was insufficient explanation of how qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated during analysis and interpretation.

Table 1*Methodological Quality of Included Studies Based on MMAT Appraisal*

Study design	Studies assessed, n	High quality, n (%)	Moderate quality, n (%)	Substantial limitations, n (%)	Main methodological concerns
Qualitative	23	17 (73.9%)	4 (17.4%)	2 (8.7%)	Limited description of analysis, sampling justification, and researcher reflexivity in some studies
Quantitative	19	11 (57.9%)	6 (31.6%)	2 (10.5%)	Representativeness, residual confounding, incomplete adjustment for contextual factors, and cross-sectional designs
Mixed methods	14	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)	0 (0.0%)	Limited explanation of integration between qualitative and quantitative components
Overall	56	37 (66.1%)	15 (26.8%)	4 (7.1%)	Confounding, sampling limitations, and inconsistent reporting of methodological integration

Source: Author (2026)

FINDINGS

Collaborative Leadership Approaches

Several collaborative leadership practices emerged across the 56 studies. Stakeholder engagement was reported in 42 studies (75.0%), making it the most frequently identified collaborative leadership mechanism. Communication and development of a shared vision were reported in 38 studies (67.9%), while shared or participatory decision-making occurred in 35 studies (62.5%). Interprofessional collaboration was identified in 32 studies (57.1%), while 29 studies (51.8%) described interorganizational, multisectoral, or public-private partnerships. Other leadership mechanisms included multidisciplinary implementation teams, distributed leadership responsibilities, community participation, stakeholder co-design, shared accountability, consultation, employee voice, and involvement of frontline healthcare workers in implementation decisions.

These findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership in health innovation is multidimensional. It involves not only formal leadership structures but also the creation of environments in which stakeholders can contribute knowledge, participate in decision-making, communicate concerns, and share responsibility for implementation. Castiglione (2020) similarly conceptualizes implementation leadership as leadership behaviour that creates organizational conditions supportive of implementing new practices. The prominence of stakeholder participation is also consistent with inclusive leadership literature. Randel et al. (2018) argue that inclusive leadership facilitates positive organizational outcomes by promoting belongingness while recognizing the unique contribution of organizational members. Aboramadan et al. (2022) further demonstrate the importance of inclusive

leadership in strengthening employee engagement through psychological safety.

Psychological safety is particularly relevant to technology and organizational change because successful implementation may require healthcare workers to question existing practices, identify system problems, communicate implementation failures, and propose alternative solutions. Edmondson (1999) describes psychological safety as a shared perception that a team environment permits interpersonal risk-taking, which provides an important theoretical basis for understanding why participation and open communication may support organizational learning during innovation. Evidence from the Kenyan health sector also illustrates the practical importance of collaborative implementation. Kang'a et al. (2017), examining sustainable implementation of electronic medical records in Kenyan public-sector health facilities, identified leadership sensitization, user training, multidisciplinary facility teams, county-level technical working groups, data-quality processes, infrastructure support, and continuing system improvement as important implementation strategies. The findings therefore suggest that collaborative leadership is not a single leadership style but a combination of stakeholder engagement, communication, shared decision-making, multidisciplinary teamwork, inclusion, empowerment, partnership, and shared accountability.

Collaborative Leadership and Implementation Outcomes

Collaborative leadership was associated with several implementation outcomes across the reviewed studies. Improved stakeholder and workforce engagement was identified in 39 studies (69.6%), while 37 studies (66.1%) associated collaborative leadership with improved coordination of implementation activities.

Improved acceptance or adoption of technology was reported in 34 studies (60.7%), while 31 studies (55.4%) indicated that collaborative approaches facilitated adaptation of innovations to organizational, clinical, or local health-system requirements.

These findings indicate that collaborative leadership may influence implementation by connecting technological requirements with the experiences of those expected to use, manage, finance, regulate, and sustain an innovation. Healthcare-worker participation during planning and implementation enabled organizations to identify workflow requirements, user concerns, infrastructure constraints, training needs, and other operational challenges before they became major implementation barriers.

This interpretation is consistent with implementation leadership literature emphasizing the role of leaders in developing an organizational climate supportive of new practices (Castiglione, 2020). It is also supported by the Kenyan EMR experience, where sustainable implementation involved engagement of leadership, system users, multidisciplinary facility teams, technical personnel, and county-level structures (Kang'a et al., 2017). Inclusive and empowering leadership perspectives further explain these findings. Randel et al. (2018) emphasize that inclusive leadership creates opportunities for participation and recognition of diverse perspectives, while psychological empowerment theory suggests that employees are more likely to contribute meaningfully where they experience autonomy, competence, impact, and meaningfulness in their roles (Spreitzer, 1995). Such mechanisms may be particularly important during technology implementation, where frontline professionals possess knowledge of clinical workflows that may not be available to technical developers or senior decision-makers.

Leadership styles also influence the organizational environment in which change occurs. Specchia et al. (2021), in a systematic review of leadership styles in nursing, demonstrated the importance of leadership for staff-related outcomes in healthcare organizations. Similarly, Hoch et al. (2018) showed through meta-analysis that contemporary leadership approaches emphasizing ethical, authentic, and servant-oriented behaviours contribute to important organizational outcomes. However, the findings also demonstrated that collaborative leadership alone was insufficient to guarantee implementation success. Organizational readiness, infrastructure, financing, workforce capacity, digital literacy, policy, governance, and technical support interacted with leadership practices. Karamagi et al. (2022) similarly identified fragmentation, coordination challenges, integration difficulties, and sustainability concerns across digital-health interventions in sub-Saharan Africa. Collaborative leadership should therefore be understood as an enabling mechanism through which technical, organizational, workforce, and contextual resources are coordinated rather than as a substitute for those resources.

Collaborative Leadership and Sustainability

Sustainability outcomes were explicitly addressed in 41 studies (73.2%). These outcomes included continued use of innovations, scale-up, integration into routine healthcare services, institutionalization, local ownership, sustained financing, workforce capacity, and continuity after the withdrawal or reduction of initial implementation support. Among the included studies, 35 studies (62.5%) identified sustained leadership or management commitment as important to long-term implementation. Local stakeholder ownership was identified in 33 studies (58.9%), while 30 studies (53.6%) emphasized integration into existing health-

system and organizational structures. Sustainable financing and availability of recurrent resources were identified in 28 studies (50.0%). The findings suggest that sustainability depends on whether an innovation moves from being a temporary project to becoming part of routine organizational practice. This transition requires leadership structures that distribute responsibility, build local capacity, secure resources, and integrate innovations into existing clinical, administrative, financial, and governance arrangements.

The importance of institutionalization is consistent with the findings of Kang'a et al. (2017), whose study of Kenyan EMR implementation demonstrated that sustainable technology adoption involved not only technical deployment but also leadership engagement, capacity building, multidisciplinary teams, infrastructure support, data-quality processes, and continued system improvement. The WHO (2021) similarly emphasizes that sustainable digital-health transformation requires integration of digital technologies into broader health-system strategies rather than implementation as isolated technological projects. Karamagi et al. (2022) further demonstrate that fragmentation remains a major concern in sub-Saharan African digital health, highlighting the need for coordination and integration. Local ownership was particularly important. Innovations were more likely to demonstrate sustainability where healthcare workers, managers, governments, communities, and other local stakeholders remained involved beyond the initial implementation phase. Conversely, sustainability was weakened where initiatives remained dependent on external implementing partners, temporary donor financing, individual project champions, or parallel systems with limited institutional ownership.

Collaborative leadership therefore appears particularly important during the transition from pilot implementation to scale-up and institutionalization, because responsibility must gradually shift from project structures toward local health institutions and systems.

Barriers to Implementation and Sustainability

Several barriers were identified across the reviewed studies. Infrastructure and technological limitations were reported in 38 studies (67.9%), making them the most frequently identified barriers. These included inadequate internet connectivity, unreliable electricity, insufficient hardware, poor interoperability, equipment maintenance challenges, and inadequate technical support. These findings are consistent with wider evidence from African digital-health research. Karamagi et al. (2022) identified significant fragmentation and uneven development of digital-health interventions across sub-Saharan Africa. Agbeyangi and Lukose (2025), focusing on telemedicine in South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, similarly identified connectivity, ICT infrastructure, affordability, and regulatory challenges as important constraints to adoption and scale-up. Financial and sustainability constraints were reported in 34 studies (60.7%). These included inadequate recurrent financing, high implementation costs, maintenance expenses, limited budgets for upgrades and replacement, and dependence on external or donor financing.

The findings indicate that financing health innovation involves more than the initial cost of acquiring technology. Sustainable implementation requires continued resources for connectivity, maintenance, licensing where applicable, cybersecurity, system upgrades, equipment replacement, workforce training, and technical support. Agbeyangi and Lukose (2025) similarly identify

affordability and infrastructure costs as important barriers to telemedicine adoption. Workforce and capacity limitations were identified in 31 studies (55.4%). These included inadequate digital competencies, insufficient training, workload pressures, staff shortages, staff turnover, and limited availability of specialized technical personnel. These findings reinforce the importance of workforce capacity in technology implementation. The Ministry of Health (2022) identifies workforce development and capacity as important components of health-system strengthening in Kenya, while the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (2023) documents continuing pressures affecting health-service delivery and public-sector capacity.

Leadership and governance weaknesses were reported in 29 studies (51.8%). These included fragmented leadership, weak stakeholder coordination, unclear responsibilities, limited accountability, centralized decision-making, poor communication, and inadequate institutional ownership. The importance of leadership is supported by healthcare leadership research. Specchia et al. (2021) found that leadership styles influence important workforce outcomes within healthcare organizations, while Castiglione (2020) emphasizes that implementation-specific leadership can shape the organizational conditions under which new practices are introduced. Policy and regulatory challenges were identified in 24 studies (42.9%), while resistance to organizational and technological change occurred in 22 studies (39.3%). Regulatory issues included data governance, privacy, interoperability, professional responsibilities, procurement requirements, and uncertainty regarding digital-health standards.

The WHO (2021) emphasizes governance, interoperability, standards, data management, workforce capacity, and institutional coordination as central components of sustainable digital-health

development. Agbeyangi and Lukose (2025) similarly demonstrate that regulatory environments influence the capacity of African countries to adopt and integrate telemedicine. Importantly, the barriers did not occur independently. Infrastructure deficiencies became more difficult to address where financing and leadership coordination were weak. Workforce resistance became more prominent where intended users were insufficiently involved in planning, while fragmented governance contributed to duplication, interoperability problems, and unclear institutional responsibility. The findings therefore demonstrate that the sustainability challenge is systemic rather than purely technological.

DISCUSSION

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 56 studies examining collaborative leadership in the implementation and sustainability of innovative technology and change initiatives in African health systems. The findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership was a recurrent component of successful health innovation, particularly through stakeholder engagement, communication, participatory decision-making, interprofessional collaboration, and partnerships.

Stakeholder engagement was identified in 75.0% of studies, communication and shared vision in 67.9%, participatory decision-making in 62.5%, interprofessional collaboration in 57.1%, and interorganizational partnerships in 51.8%. These findings reinforce the view that implementation leadership involves more than formal authority and requires leaders to create conditions that enable participation, commitment, coordination, and implementation of new practices (Castiglione, 2020).

Collaborative leadership was associated with improved stakeholder and workforce engagement in 69.6% of studies, improved implementation coordination in 66.1%, technology acceptance or adoption in 60.7%, and contextual adaptation in 55.4%. Similar observations have been made in implementation of EMRs in Kenya, where sustainable deployment involved engagement of leaders, users, multidisciplinary facility teams, and county technical working groups rather than reliance on technological installation alone (Kang'a et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, significant structural barriers remained. Infrastructure and technological limitations were identified in 67.9% of studies, financial and sustainability constraints in 60.7%, workforce limitations in 55.4%, leadership and governance weaknesses in 51.8%, policy and regulatory challenges in 42.9%, and resistance to change in 39.3%. These findings are broadly consistent with previous African digital-health evidence identifying infrastructure, financing, governance, interoperability, workforce capacity, and integration as persistent challenges (Karamagi et al., 2022; Agbeyangi & Lukose, 2025).

Collaborative Leadership and Implementation of Health Innovation

The high frequency of stakeholder engagement (75.0%) suggests that participation is central to implementation of technology and organizational change. Digital innovations affect multiple aspects of healthcare and therefore require interaction between clinicians, managers, information technology personnel, policymakers, technology providers, financing institutions, patients, and communities. Implementation leadership has been described as leadership directed specifically toward creating a strategic and supportive climate for implementation (Castiglione, 2020). Within

technology programmes, such leadership may enable organizations to reconcile technical requirements with clinical workflows and stakeholder expectations.

The finding that 69.6% of studies associated collaborative leadership with improved workforce or stakeholder engagement is therefore significant. Healthcare professionals possess practical knowledge of clinical workflows, while technology specialists provide technical expertise and managers provide organizational and resource oversight. Collaboration enables these different forms of knowledge to be incorporated into implementation.

This interpretation is supported by Kang'a et al. (2017), who showed that sustainable EMR implementation in Kenyan public health facilities involved leadership sensitization, training, multidisciplinary facility teams, county technical working groups, data-quality activities, and infrastructure provision. These findings suggest that sustainable implementation depends on coordinated organizational action rather than technical deployment alone.

Collaborative Leadership and Sustainability

An important finding was that 41 studies (73.2%) explicitly addressed sustainability. Sustained leadership commitment was identified in 62.5%, local ownership in 58.9%, integration into routine structures in 53.6%, and sustainable financing in 50.0%. The review provides practical implications for governments, healthcare organizations, health managers, development partners, and technology providers by emphasizing multidisciplinary governance, workforce participation, local ownership, sustainable financing, policy alignment, capacity development, and integration into existing health-system structures. Finally, the review identifies important evidence gaps, particularly the limited

representation of Central and North Africa, inconsistent measurement of collaborative leadership and sustainability, and scarcity of longitudinal research examining whether innovations continue after external financing and implementation support are withdrawn. distinction between implementation and sustainability is critical. An innovation can achieve initial adoption while remaining dependent on project financing, external technical expertise, or temporary implementation structures. Sustainability requires continued use and the transfer of responsibility into routine organizational and health-system structures.

Evidence from Malawi demonstrates this challenge. An mHealth community case-management programme achieved its intended goals but encountered wider sustainability challenges involving financial resources, limited integration with existing programmes and ICT systems, and insufficient local capacity for maintenance and management (Moucheraud et al., 2019). These observations support the current review's finding that leadership, ownership, integration, financing, and capacity must operate together for innovation to persist.

Collaborative leadership may therefore provide a mechanism for moving from external project implementation to institutional ownership. Meaningful participation by government, health managers, healthcare workers, communities, and implementing partners can distribute responsibility and create conditions for continuation after initial support declines.

Infrastructure and Technological Environment

Infrastructure and technological barriers were reported in 67.9% of the reviewed studies, making them the most frequent constraints. This finding is consistent with wider evidence from

sub-Saharan Africa. Karamagi et al. (2022) identified extensive digital-health activity across the region but highlighted fragmentation and challenges associated with coordination, integration, scalability, and sustainability. Telemedicine evidence from South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria has similarly identified unreliable electricity, weak broadband connectivity, inadequate ICT infrastructure, financial constraints, and regulatory gaps as barriers to widespread adoption (Agbeyangi & Lukose, 2025).

Current health-information-system evidence also illustrates the continuing structural challenge. WHO Regional Office for Africa reported that 37 countries, representing 79% of the region, completed HIS maturity assessments in 2024, with overall regional maturity standing at only 58%. Fragmentation, lack of interoperability, and inadequate data governance remain significant challenges (WHO Regional Office for Africa, 2026). These findings demonstrate that collaborative leadership cannot substitute for basic infrastructure. However, it can facilitate coordinated resource mobilization, prioritization, partnerships, and strategic investment required to address structural barriers.

Workforce Capacity and Resistance to Change

Workforce limitations were identified in 55.4% of studies and resistance to change in 39.3%, while training and capacity building emerged as facilitators in 64.3%. These findings demonstrate that workforce readiness is both a potential barrier and an important opportunity for implementation. Healthcare professionals may experience difficulties where technologies are introduced without adequate training, increase workload, disrupt workflows, or appear disconnected from clinical priorities.

The Kenyan experience provides evidence that training should be integrated with broader implementation strategies rather than treated as a single activity. Kang'a et al. (2017) combined user training with leadership sensitization, multidisciplinary teams, technical support, data-quality activities, and infrastructure improvement. Collaborative leadership may further reduce resistance by involving intended users before implementation decisions are finalized. Participation enables healthcare workers to identify practical problems, influence system design, and understand the purpose of organizational change.

Financing and Long-Term Sustainability

Financial and sustainability constraints occurred in 60.7% of studies, while sustainable financing was identified as a facilitator in 50.0%. Financial barriers are also evident in telemedicine implementation, particularly where costs associated with internet access, devices, infrastructure, and service delivery limit adoption (Agbeyangi & Lukose, 2025). The findings emphasize the distinction between financing technology acquisition and financing its lifecycle. Sustainable digital-health systems require recurrent expenditure for connectivity, maintenance, technical support, cybersecurity, licensing where applicable, workforce development, system upgrades, and replacement of equipment.

The Malawi mHealth experience illustrates this issue, with insufficient financial resources identified among the barriers to wider implementation and sustainability (Moucheraud et al., 2019). Sustainability planning should therefore establish financial ownership and recurrent resource requirements before an innovation progresses to scale.

Leadership and Governance

Leadership and governance weaknesses were reported in 51.8% of studies. This is important because governance interacts with infrastructure, financing, workforce capacity, interoperability, policy alignment, and institutional ownership. The WHO African Region continues to identify fragmentation across health-information systems, insufficient interoperability, and weaknesses in data governance as causes of underutilization of health information (WHO Regional Office for Africa, 2026). Similarly, Karamagi et al. (2022) highlighted fragmentation and inadequate coordination across digital-health interventions in sub-Saharan Africa.

Collaborative governance may address these problems by creating mechanisms through which governments, healthcare organizations, clinical users, technology teams, financing bodies, and partners establish shared standards, responsibilities, priorities, and accountability. This supports the review's finding that stakeholder engagement (75.0%) and leadership commitment (62.5%) were among the most prominent facilitators. Sustainable governance should therefore be institutional rather than dependent on a single project leader or technology champion.

Policy and Regulatory Environment

Policy and regulatory challenges were identified in 42.9% of studies. These included data governance, privacy, interoperability, procurement, professional responsibilities, and alignment between technology programmes and national health strategies. Agbeyangi and Lukose (2025) found that policy environments influenced telemedicine adoption across South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, with stronger formal policy arrangements providing more

supportive conditions for adoption and integration. WHO also emphasizes interoperability, data sharing, standards, governance, and evidence-informed implementation as central elements of digital-health development (WHO, 2021). Policy alignment is therefore not an activity that should occur after technology deployment but an important component of planning, implementation, scale-up, and sustainability.

Scaling and Institutionalization

The findings indicate that scale-up and institutionalization should be planned from the beginning of the innovation lifecycle. Local ownership was reported in 58.9% of studies, integration into existing structures in 53.6%, and sustainable financing in 50.0%. These findings correspond with previous research emphasizing integration as a condition for sustainability. In Malawi, lack of integration with existing community and national programmes and ICT systems was identified as a barrier to wider implementation of an mHealth intervention (Moucheraud et al., 2019). Karamagi et al. (2022) similarly identified fragmentation and limited coordination as important challenges across digital-health interventions in sub-Saharan Africa.

Collaborative leadership operates across this continuum by aligning stakeholders during planning, coordinating implementation, supporting learning and adaptation, mobilizing resources for scale-up, and creating institutional ownership and accountability for long-term operation.

Comparison Across African Regions

East Africa accounted for 39.3% of the included studies, followed by West Africa (26.8%), Southern Africa (19.6%), North Africa

(8.9%), and Central Africa (5.4%). Thus, 66.1% of the included evidence originated from East and West Africa.

The geographical imbalance should be considered when interpreting the findings. Previous reviews have also demonstrated uneven distribution of digital-health interventions and investments across sub-Saharan Africa (Karamagi et al., 2022). Differences in infrastructure, digital maturity, policy environments, financing, workforce capacity, and governance mean that implementation experiences cannot automatically be generalized between countries. The findings demonstrate that sustainable health innovation in Africa is not exclusively a technological challenge. Infrastructure was the most frequently identified barrier (67.9%), but financial constraints (60.7%), workforce limitations (55.4%), and leadership and governance weaknesses (51.8%) were also prominent.

Limitations of the review

The review was restricted to studies published between 2016 and 2026 and may therefore exclude earlier foundational evidence. English-language restrictions may have contributed to underrepresentation of Francophone, Lusophone, and Arabic-speaking African settings. Heterogeneity across the 56 studies in technology type, leadership constructs, methodology, and outcome measurement limited direct comparison and prevented meaningful meta-analysis. Similar heterogeneity and fragmentation have been identified in previous assessments of digital-health interventions in sub-Saharan Africa. Despite these limitations, the convergence between the findings of this review and previous evidence on implementation leadership, sustainable EMR implementation, mHealth sustainability, and digital-health systems in Africa strengthens the conclusion that technological

innovation should be accompanied by collaborative governance, stakeholder ownership, workforce capacity, financing, and institutional integration (Kang'a et al., 2017; Moucheraud et al., 2019; Castiglione, 2020; Karamagi et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION

This systematic review highlights the important role of collaborative leadership in the implementation and sustainability of innovative technology and change initiatives within African health systems. Stakeholder engagement (75.0%), communication and shared vision (67.9%), participatory decision-making (62.5%), interprofessional collaboration (57.1%), and interorganizational partnerships (51.8%) emerged as prominent dimensions of collaborative leadership. These findings demonstrate that implementation of health innovation extends beyond the acquisition and deployment of technology and depends substantially on how stakeholders, organizations, resources, and implementation processes are coordinated. Collaborative leadership was associated with improved stakeholder and workforce engagement (69.6%), implementation coordination (66.1%), technology acceptance or adoption (60.7%), and adaptation of innovations to local and organizational contexts (55.4%).

Despite these benefits, substantial barriers to implementation and sustainability persisted. Infrastructure and technological limitations were identified in 67.9% of studies, financial and sustainability constraints in 60.7%, workforce limitations in 55.4%, leadership and governance weaknesses in 51.8%, policy and regulatory challenges in 42.9%, and resistance to change in 39.3%. These findings correspond with wider evidence showing that African digital-health initiatives continue to face challenges

involving infrastructure, fragmentation, coordination, financing, workforce capacity, regulation, integration, and sustainability.

Sustainability was explicitly considered in 73.2% of the reviewed studies. Sustained leadership commitment (62.5%), local ownership (58.9%), integration into existing health-system structures (53.6%), and sustainable financing (50.0%) were particularly important. Evidence from mHealth implementation in Malawi similarly demonstrates that long-term sustainability can be undermined by inadequate financing, weak integration with existing health and ICT systems, and insufficient local capacity for system maintenance and management (Moucheraud et al., 2019). Sustainability should therefore be planned from the beginning of an innovation rather than considered only after successful pilot implementation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the findings support the proposition that collaborative leadership is an important link between health innovation and sustainable health-system change in Africa. Its contribution lies in creating mechanisms through which healthcare workers, managers, governments, communities, development partners, technology providers, and other stakeholders can develop shared priorities, coordinate resources, build implementation capacity, adapt innovations to local contexts, and establish institutional ownership. However, collaborative leadership should not be viewed independently of the broader health system. Its effectiveness depends on adequate infrastructure, workforce capacity, sustainable financing, supportive governance, regulatory frameworks, and organizational readiness.

African health systems should therefore move beyond technology-centred implementation toward collaborative, health-system centred models of innovation. Governments and healthcare organizations should institutionalize multidisciplinary governance structures, involve intended users throughout the innovation lifecycle, strengthen workforce capacity, integrate technologies into routine health services and budgets, and establish sustainable financing and accountability mechanisms. Particular attention should be given to transitioning externally supported innovations from project ownership to local institutional ownership.

Ultimately, sustainable health innovation in Africa is not determined by technology alone. Technology provides the capability for transformation, but collaborative leadership helps align the people, institutions, resources, policies, and organizational processes necessary to convert that capability into sustained improvements in health-system performance.

Future research should use longitudinal and comparative designs to determine how collaborative leadership influences innovation from adoption through implementation, scale-up, institutionalization, and long-term sustainability. Greater research attention is also required in Central and North Africa, which were relatively underrepresented in the available evidence. Standardized measures of collaborative leadership and sustainability would further strengthen comparison across health technologies, organizations, and countries.

CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

The review demonstrates that collaborative leadership is associated with implementation outcomes extending beyond

technology adoption, including stakeholder and workforce engagement (69.6%), implementation coordination (66.1%), technology acceptance and adoption (60.7%), and contextual adaptation of innovations (55.4%). It identifies the principal barriers to sustainable health innovation as infrastructure and technological limitations (67.9%), financial and sustainability constraints (60.7%), workforce limitations (55.4%), leadership and governance weaknesses (51.8%), policy and regulatory challenges (42.9%), and resistance to change (39.3%). The review demonstrates the importance of distinguishing implementation from sustainability. Although 73.2% of the included studies addressed sustainability, sustained leadership commitment (62.5%), local ownership (58.9%), health-system integration (53.6%), and sustainable financing (50.0%) emerged as important requirements for moving innovations beyond initial implementation. The findings reposition health technology sustainability as a combined technological, organizational, leadership, and health-system challenge and demonstrate the need to shift from externally driven project implementation toward locally governed and institutionally owned innovation.

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1

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA: ADVANCES, PRACTICES, AND GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

Solomon Munyao

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8033-4636>

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is increasingly understood as a process through which individuals and leadership teams provide direction, influence organizational behaviour, mobilize resources, and create conditions for achieving organizational and societal objectives. Contemporary strategic leadership extends beyond authority, supervision, and routine administration to encompass strategic vision, environmental scanning, innovation, organizational learning, governance, stakeholder engagement, adaptability, and sustainable value creation. These demands have become particularly important because organizations operate in increasingly complex environments characterized by technological disruption, economic uncertainty, institutional change, environmental pressures, and shifting stakeholder expectations. This study examines the evolution, conceptual dimensions, contextual practices, indigenous foundations, organizational applications, challenges, and global contributions of strategic leadership in Africa. The study adopts an integration of SLR and narrative review approach to synthesize recent scholarly and institutional evidence on strategic leadership, African leadership, organizational performance, governance,

digital transformation, indigenous leadership, Ubuntu, organizational resilience, and sustainable development, following systematic-review reporting principles associated with PRISMA 2020 and narrative themes analyzed. The findings indicate that strategic leadership in Africa is increasingly characterized by strategic direction, human-capital development, organizational culture, resource management, strategic decision-making, innovation, ethical governance, strategic adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and strategic control. Evidence further demonstrates that strategic leadership is shaped by institutional conditions, cultural expectations, resource constraints, techno-logical transformation, environmental vulnerability, governance systems, and indigenous leadership philosophies. The review suggests that strategic leadership should integrate contemporary strategic-management capabilities with African relational, communal, ethical, and indigenous perspectives, positioning African leadership experiences as both contextually grounded practices and potential contributors to global leadership scholar-ship.

Keywords: *Africa; Strategic Leadership; Strategic Direction; Organizational Performance; Organizational Resilience; Strategic Adaptability*

INTRODUCTION

Leadership remains an important field of organizational scholarship because leadership decisions influence strategic direction, organizational capabilities, employee behaviour, institutional effectiveness, and long-term organizational performance. In contemporary organizations, leaders are increasingly expected not only to guide employees and coordinate activities but also to shape organizational purpose, develop strategic capabilities, manage uncertainty, and create conditions that support sustainable performance. Strategic leadership has therefore attracted growing scholarly attention because it connects leadership processes with broader economic, social, environmental, organizational, and institutional outcomes, extending the understanding of leadership beyond immediate operational performance (Singh et al., 2023).

The importance of strategic leadership is particularly pronounced in contemporary organizational environments characterized by uncertainty, technological disruption, institutional complexity, economic volatility, environmental pressures, geopolitical developments, and rapidly changing stakeholder expectations. Such conditions have made approaches based primarily on stability, predictability, and hierarchical control increasingly inadequate. Leaders are consequently required to anticipate environmental developments, interpret emerging opportunities and threats, formulate appropriate strategic directions, align organizational resources with strategic priorities, develop organizational capabilities, manage competing stakeholder interests, foster innovation, and strengthen organizational resilience (AfDB, 2025; UNDP, 2024; Singh et al., 2023; Drago et al., 2023). Strategic leadership therefore extends beyond

authority, supervision, motivation, and operational control to encompass the capacity to connect organizational purpose with environmental opportunities and threats, resource allocation, strategic implementation, innovation, and long-term sustainability.

Strategic leadership is increasingly understood as a multidimensional capability rather than a single leadership behaviour or style. Recent scholarship encompasses strategic leaders and upper echelons, strategic choices, innovation, digital transformation, competitive advantage, strategic succession, organizational capabilities, and organizational performance (Singh et al., 2023). Effective strategic leadership consequently requires leaders to establish clear strategic direction while ensuring that organizational structures, people, resources, culture, and processes support strategic objectives. It also requires the capacity to learn continuously, interpret complex information, encourage innovation, manage organizational change, and make responsible decisions where information may be incomplete or rapidly changing. Thus, effective strategic leadership involves not only identifying where an organization should go but also developing the people, systems, resources, and organizational culture necessary to move the organization toward its desired future (AfDB, 2025; UNDP, 2024; Drago et al., 2023).

These requirements acquire particular significance in Africa, where organizations face global pressures alongside distinctive institutional, economic, technological, cultural, political, and developmental conditions. African organizations operate in contexts characterized by resource constraints, uneven infrastructure, institutional capacity challenges, governance pressures, skills gaps, technological inequalities, and rapidly changing economic conditions. At the same time, the continent possesses substantial opportunities associated with its youthful population, expanding

markets, entrepreneurship, digital innovation, regional integration, natural resources, and growing participation in the global economy (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025). The strategic-leadership challenge is therefore twofold: leaders must respond effectively to immediate and interconnected constraints while mobilizing Africa's considerable human, natural, financial, entrepreneurial, and business capital to generate sustainable organizational and societal value (AfDB, 2025).

The African context consequently requires strategic leadership that combines strategic foresight with contextual responsiveness. Leaders must anticipate emerging opportunities and threats while interpreting local institutional realities, mobilizing and allocating scarce resources, strengthening organizational and institutional capabilities, fostering innovation, managing change, and building resilience. This requires more than the application of universal management practices. Strategic leadership in Africa must integrate strategic competence with cultural awareness, ethical responsibility, relational capability, and contextual adaptability, particularly because relationships with employees, communities, governments, customers, development partners, and other stakeholders can significantly influence organizational legitimacy and access to resources (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025; Singh et al., 2023).

Governance and institutional capacity are central to this contextualized understanding of strategic leadership. The Africa Governance and Development Outlook 2024 identifies complex domestic, regional, and international risks that require leaders in government and business to strengthen governance systems and navigate changing development conditions effectively (UNDP, 2024). Concerns regarding institutional trust, accountability, democratic consolidation, and governance resilience further

reinforce the need for ethical and institutionally oriented leadership. Similarly, the African Economic Outlook 2025 emphasizes that effective institutions, sound economic governance, the rule of law, transparent public financial management, and prudent resource management are essential for transforming Africa's resources into inclusive and sustainable development (AfDB, 2025). Strategic leadership must therefore extend beyond vision formulation to the establishment of accountable systems capable of translating strategic intentions into measurable and sustainable results.

Technological transformation and climate change further intensify the strategic-leadership challenge. Digital technologies, artificial intelligence, data analytics, automation, and digital platforms create opportunities for economic diversification, innovation, productivity improvement, entrepreneurship, service delivery, and enhanced quality of life. However, uneven digital infrastructure, skills, institutional readiness, and technology access create significant differences in the capacity of African organizations and countries to benefit from digital transformation (AfDB, 2024). Similarly, climate-related risks increasingly affect food systems, water resources, infrastructure, livelihoods, health, and economic stability, requiring leaders to integrate environmental risk, resilience, adaptation, sustainability, and resource mobilization into strategic planning (AfDB, 2024). African strategic leaders must therefore develop technological and environmental capabilities while ensuring that transformation processes remain inclusive, ethical, sustainable, and responsive to local conditions.

A further consideration is the extent to which strategic-leadership scholarship adequately reflects African realities. Established strategic-leadership theories provide useful explanations of strategic direction, organizational capabilities, decision-making,

innovation, and performance, but their application in Africa must take account of local institutional realities, cultural values, relational networks, communal orientations, and indigenous knowledge systems. African leadership research has historically engaged extensively with theories and models developed in Western organizational contexts, while contextually grounded African perspectives have received comparatively less attention within mainstream strategic-leadership theory (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Philosophies such as Ubuntu, communal responsibility, relational leadership, consensus building, stewardship, and collective wellbeing offer potentially important insights into ethical governance, stakeholder engagement, organizational trust, collaboration, and sustainable leadership. Yet these perspectives remain insufficiently integrated with contemporary strategic concepts such as strategic direction, organizational capabilities, innovation, digital transformation, resource management, and strategic control.

This contextual and conceptual challenge is accompanied by fragmentation in the empirical evidence on strategic leadership in Africa. Existing studies demonstrate significant relationships between strategic leadership and organizational outcomes, but much of the available evidence is concentrated in particular countries, especially Kenya, and in specific sectors such as education, healthcare, manufacturing, financial services, government, and nonprofit organizations (Abdi et al., 2024; Kiende & Muthimi, 2024; Lengingiro et al., 2024). While such studies provide valuable evidence, their country- and sector-specific nature makes it difficult to determine whether identified strategic-leadership practices are broadly applicable across Africa's diverse institutional, cultural, political, and economic environments. Moreover, the predominance of cross-sectional designs and direct-relationship

studies provides limited evidence concerning how strategic leadership develops over time, how it operates under different contextual conditions, and through which organizational mechanisms it produces sustainable outcomes.

The understanding of strategic leadership in Africa must also recognize that organizational performance extends beyond conventional measures such as financial returns, productivity, efficiency, and market competitiveness. Many African organizations and institutions pursue broader outcomes involving social impact, community development, employee wellbeing, institutional legitimacy, resilience, sustainability, public value, and mission effectiveness. Strategic leadership should therefore be examined in relation to multidimensional organizational and institutional outcomes while recognizing the different purposes and accountability expectations of private firms, public institutions, universities, healthcare organizations, nonprofit organizations, and faith-based institutions (AfDB, 2025; UNDP, 2024).

From extant scholarship, the central strategic-leadership challenge in Africa is not simply the absence of leaders or leadership structures, but the limited availability and development of leadership capabilities capable of responding effectively to interconnected institutional, economic, technological, environmental, organizational, and societal challenges. African organizations require leaders who can translate vision into strategy, strategy into organizational capabilities, and organizational capabilities into measurable results while balancing short-term operational requirements with long-term strategic priorities. They must make ethical and evidence-informed decisions, mobilize and optimize scarce resources, develop human capital, foster innovation, manage organizational change, strengthen governance systems,

engage diverse stakeholders, and build institutional resilience (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025; Singh et al., 2023).

Accordingly, strategic leadership in Africa is best understood as a contextualized, multidimensional capability through which leaders anticipate and interpret environmental change, establish strategic direction, mobilize resources, build organizational and institutional capabilities, strengthen governance, foster innovation, and create sustainable value. Its significance extends beyond organizational performance to institutional development, sustainable economic growth, social transformation, and Africa's participation in the global knowledge economy (AfDB, 2025; UNDP, 2024; Singh et al., 2023). A systematic examination is therefore necessary to synthesize evidence across countries and sectors, identify the major dimensions and practices of strategic leadership, examine the contextual factors that shape its effectiveness, assess its relationship with multidimensional organizational and institutional outcomes, and determine how indigenous African leadership philosophies can enrich contemporary strategic leadership thought.

The overall purpose of this study is to examine and synthesize the evolution, practices, contextual foundations, challenges, outcomes, indigenous foundations, and global relevance of strategic leadership in Africa. The review is guided by the following questions:

1. How has strategic leadership evolved and been conceptualized within the African context?
2. What strategic leadership practices and competencies characterize effective leadership in African organizations and institutions?

3. What contextual factors influence the practice and effectiveness of strategic leadership in Africa?
4. How do indigenous knowledge systems, communal values, Ubuntu, and relational traditions shape strategic leadership in Africa?
5. What organizational and societal outcomes are associated with strategic leadership in African contexts?
6. What major challenges constrain effective strategic leadership in Africa?
7. In what ways do African strategic-leadership experiences contribute to or challenge global leadership scholarship and practice?
8. What gaps exist in the literature and what areas require further investigation?

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION AND OPERATIONALIZATION OF STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Based on the reviewed evidence, strategic leadership is conceptualized as a multidimensional organizational capability through which leaders establish strategic direction, develop human capital, shape organizational culture, manage resources, make strategic decisions, promote innovation and learning, exercise ethical governance, lead adaptation and change, engage stakeholders, and control strategic implementation to achieve sustainable organizational outcomes (Singh et al., 2023; Drago et al., 2023). This conceptualization recognizes that strategic leadership is not a single behaviour or style but an interconnected system of capabilities that enables organizations to interpret their

environments, mobilize resources, develop organizational capacity, implement strategy, and sustain performance.

The proposed dimensions comprise strategic direction, human-capital development, organizational culture, resource portfolio management, strategic decision-making, innovation and organizational learning, ethical leadership and governance, strategic adaptability and change leadership, stakeholder engagement, and strategic control and performance management. These dimensions are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Strategic direction provides organizational purpose; human-capital development provides implementation capacity; organizational culture shapes behaviour; resource management provides the means of implementation; decision-making determines strategic choices; innovation and learning facilitate renewal; ethical governance protects institutional legitimacy; adaptability enables organizational response; stakeholder engagement builds support and partnerships; while strategic control ensures implementation, accountability, and performance.

Strategic direction concerns the capacity of leaders to establish organizational vision, strategic intent, priorities, goals, and long-term direction. It provides the foundation through which organizational resources and activities are aligned with desired future outcomes. Evidence from Kenyan universities and other organizations indicates that strategic vision and planning are associated with organizational performance (Lengingiro et al., 2024; Kiende & Muthimi, 2024). Strategic direction can be determined by vision clarity, strategic intent, mission alignment, strategic planning, communication of priorities, long-term orientation, and environmental scanning.

Human-capital development involves strengthening employee knowledge, skills, competencies, leadership potential, commitment, and organizational learning. Strategic leaders develop people through training, mentoring, coaching, empowerment, succession planning, and knowledge-sharing mechanisms. Recent evidence from Kenyan banking demonstrates a significant relationship between human-capital development and organizational performance (Wachira & Wainaina, 2025). Human capital development entails employee development, empowerment, mentoring, coaching, succession planning, talent management, professional development, and knowledge management.

Organizational culture encompasses shared values, beliefs, norms, assumptions, and behavioural expectations that influence how organizational members interpret and implement strategy. A strategically supportive culture promotes ethical behaviour, collaboration, innovation, learning, and adaptability. Evidence from Kenyan dairy-processing firms demonstrates the relevance of organizational culture as a component of strategic leadership and organizational performance (Kiende & Muthimi, 2024). Indicators of organizational culture are shared values, ethical climate, innovation orientation, teamwork, learning orientation, collaboration, and adaptability.

Resource portfolio management refers to the acquisition, prioritization, allocation, integration, and optimization of financial, human, technological, informational, and relational resources. This dimension is especially important in African contexts characterized by substantial development needs and resource constraints (AfDB, 2025). Strategic leaders must ensure that scarce resources are aligned with high-priority strategic objectives and used

efficiently. Its elements are resource allocation, resource mobilization, prioritization, resource optimization, technology investment, partnerships, and resource flexibility.

Strategic decision-making involves making informed, timely, future-oriented, ethical, and risk-sensitive decisions under conditions of uncertainty. Contemporary strategic-leadership research identifies strategic choices and decision-making as central themes within the field (Singh et al., 2023). Its indicators are evidence-based decisions, risk assessment, timeliness, future orientation, stakeholder consideration, and strategic judgement.

Innovation and organizational learning involve generating, acquiring, sharing, and applying knowledge to improve products, services, processes, technologies, and organizational practices. Strategic leadership research increasingly links innovation and organizational capabilities with strategic adaptation and organizational performance (Singh et al., 2023; Drago et al., 2023). Innovation and organizational learning is determined through creativity, experimentation, knowledge sharing, learning from failure, technology adoption, continuous improvement, and innovation capability. Ethical leadership and governance concern integrity, accountability, transparency, fairness, stewardship, responsible decision-making, and institutional trust. African governance literature emphasizes these elements as important foundations for sustainable development (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025). Tenets of ethical leadership and governance are integrity, transparency, accountability, fairness, stewardship, responsible resource use, compliance, and trust.

Strategic adaptability involves anticipating and responding effectively to environmental change and includes organizational agility, resilience, strategic flexibility, change management, and

environmental responsiveness (Drago et al., 2023). Recent evidence from Kenyan financial institutions demonstrates the importance of organizational change management as a strategic-leadership component associated with performance (Kamande & Muthimi, 2025). Their indicators are change management, organizational agility, strategic flexibility, resilience, environmental responsiveness, and transformation capability.

Stakeholder engagement involves developing productive relationships with individuals and institutions that influence or are affected by organizational activities. African governance and development literature emphasize collaboration, partnerships, citizen engagement, and institutional cooperation as important components of sustainable development (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025). Stakeholder engagement can be established through stakeholder collaboration, strategic communication, partnerships, community engagement, customer orientation, stakeholder responsiveness, and relationship management.

Strategic control and performance management involve monitoring strategic implementation, measuring results, identifying deviations, providing feedback, and initiating corrective action. Evidence from Kenyan churches demonstrates that balanced organizational controls can explain substantial variation in organizational performance (Ouma & Muthimi, 2024). Their measurable elements are key performance indicators, strategic reviews, performance feedback, monitoring and evaluation, accountability, corrective action, and strategic alignment.

The reviewed evidence indicates that strategic leadership should be understood as a system of interdependent capabilities rather than a single leadership behaviour or style (Singh et al., 2023). Strategic direction provides purpose; human-capital development

provides implementation capacity; organizational culture shapes behaviour; resource management provides the means of implementation; strategic decision-making determines courses of action; innovation and learning facilitate renewal; ethical governance protects legitimacy; strategic adaptability enables organizational response; stakeholder engagement mobilizes support; and strategic control maintains accountability. Together, these dimensions enable leaders to translate organizational vision into coordinated action and sustainable outcomes.

The dimensions are mutually reinforcing rather than independent. Strategic direction without adequate resources may remain aspirational, while resources without strategic direction may be inefficiently deployed. Similarly, technological investments without human-capital development, organizational learning, and appropriate culture may fail to generate sustainable organizational value (AfDB, 2024; Singh et al., 2023). Strategic leadership is therefore best understood as an integrated capability in which multiple leadership dimensions interact to strengthen organizational adaptability, innovation, resilience, performance, and long-term sustainability.

Knowledge gaps in existing strategic-leadership literature

A major contextual gap concerns the geographical concentration of empirical evidence. Although recent studies demonstrate considerable research activity in Kenya, evidence from other African regions remains comparatively limited (Abdi et al., 2024; Kiende & Muthimi, 2024; Lengingiro et al., 2024). Future research should therefore undertake comparative studies across Eastern, Western, Central, Northern, and Southern Africa to determine which strategic-leadership practices are broadly applicable and which are context-specific.

The literature demonstrates considerable variation in the operationalization of strategic leadership. Studies variously emphasize strategic direction, organizational culture, human capital, strategic controls, networking, ethical practices, organizational capabilities, change management, and innovation (Kiende & Muthimi, 2024; Kamande & Muthimi, 2025). This fragmentation makes it difficult to establish a coherent and universally accepted African conceptualization of strategic leadership and points to the need for more theoretically integrated frameworks.

Many empirical studies continue to assess organizational performance predominantly through conventional financial and operational indicators. However, African organizations also pursue social, institutional, community, developmental, educational, health, and mission-oriented outcomes. This is particularly evident in public, nonprofit, educational, health, and faith-based organizations (Ouma & Muthimi, 2024). Future research should therefore develop multidimensional and context-sensitive measures of organizational outcomes. A substantial proportion of recent empirical research relies on cross-sectional survey designs. Although such studies provide useful evidence concerning associations among variables, they are limited in their ability to explain long-term effects, dynamic processes, and causal mechanisms. Future research should therefore employ longitudinal, mixed-method, comparative, case-study, and systematic-review designs to develop deeper explanations of how strategic leadership influences organizational outcomes over time.

Strategic leadership has been investigated in business, health, education, government, nonprofit, banking, and faith-based organizations, but much of the research remains sector-specific. Comparative studies across sectors are needed to determine which strategic-leadership dimensions are generalizable and

which are shaped by sector-specific institutional requirements, objectives, stakeholder structures, and performance expectations. The integration of indigenous African leadership philosophies into strategic-leadership models remains underdeveloped. Recent Ubuntu scholarship demonstrates that African philosophies can provide important theoretical resources for understanding responsible leadership, ethics, relationality, and collective well-being (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Further empirical research is required to establish how Ubuntu, Harambee, communal leadership, traditional consultation, and other indigenous systems influence strategic leadership practices in contemporary organizations.

Much existing research focuses on direct relationships between strategic leadership and organizational performance. However, organizational capabilities, digital transformation, organizational culture, governance, and change management may influence the strength or direction of these relationships (Kamande & Muthimi, 2025; Drago et al., 2023). Future research should therefore examine mediating and moderating variables such as organizational culture, innovation capability, governance, digital transformation, succession planning, environmental turbulence, organizational size, and institutional context.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted an integrated Systematic Literature Review (SLR) employed specifically to identify and evaluate literature on strategic leadership in Africa and narrative review methodology to synthesize, and critically interpret the identified scholarship to deduce themes that could guide the study findings and conclusion. The combination of SLR and integrative narrative

review approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to consolidate a broad and multidisciplinary body of knowledge across leadership, management, organizational studies, governance, development, education, and related fields rather than collect primary data from individual respondents or organizations. Unlike a conventional narrative review, the integration of narrative-SLR employs a structured, transparent, and reproducible process for identifying relevant studies, assessing their eligibility and methodological quality, and synthesizing their findings (Page et al., 2021). The review was initially guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) framework, which provides guidance for transparent reporting of systematic reviews through the stages of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion (Page et al., 2021). The design enabled the review to examine dominant themes, emerging practices, contextual variations, indigenous perspectives, organizational outcomes, methodological tendencies, and research gaps relating to strategic leadership in African contexts.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted using major scholarly databases and electronic repositories, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined keywords and Boolean operators to capture the broad conceptual and contextual dimensions of strategic leadership. Key search terms included “strategic leadership,” “strategic leadership in Africa,” “strategic leadership and organizational performance,” “strategic adaptability,” “strategic agility,” “strategic leadership practices,” and “strategic leadership capabilities.” Where appropriate, country-specific searches were undertaken to ensure representation of evidence from different African regions and to minimize overreliance on studies from a small number of

countries. Priority was given to peer-reviewed literature published between 2021 and 2026, thereby ensuring that the principal evidence base reflected contemporary developments in strategic leadership, including digital transformation, innovation, organizational resilience, sustainability, strategic agility, and governance. However, seminal studies published before 2021 were selectively retained where they provided essential theoretical or conceptual foundations that could not adequately be replaced by recent scholarship.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were selected using predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Publications were included when they focused explicitly on strategic leadership or closely related constructs, examined leadership within an African organizational, institutional, national, or societal context, were published primarily between 2021 and 2026, and provided sufficient conceptual, theoretical, methodological, or empirical information relevant to the review objectives. Peer-reviewed journal articles and credible scholarly publications were prioritized, while studies that focused exclusively on non-African contexts, addressed leadership without a substantive connection to strategic leadership, or consisted of non-scholarly materials such as blogs, news articles, commercial publications, and unsupported opinion pieces were excluded.

Retrieved records were initially screened for relevance, duplicates were removed, titles and abstracts were assessed against the eligibility criteria, and potentially relevant publications underwent full-text assessment. The final selection was based on geographical relevance, conceptual alignment, methodological adequacy, publication period, and contribution to the study objectives. The methodological quality of included studies was also considered by

examining the clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of research design, sampling procedures, data collection and analysis methods, transparency of reporting, and consistency between findings and conclusions.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Data were systematically extracted from the selected studies, including authors, publication year, country or region, research context, objectives, theoretical framework, research design, sample characteristics, key variables or constructs, analytical approaches, major findings, conclusions, and identified research gaps. The extracted information was organized into thematic categories and synthesized using a thematic synthesis approach, which was considered appropriate because of the methodological and contextual heterogeneity of the literature. The synthesis examined recurring dimensions of strategic leadership, including strategic vision, strategic thinking, decision-making, innovation, adaptability and resilience, ethical leadership, talent development, digital transformation, organizational performance, governance, sustainability, and indigenous African leadership perspectives.

Attention was given to African contextual factors such as cultural values, institutional environments, socioeconomic conditions, governance systems, technological change, resource constraints, and indigenous leadership traditions. The credibility of the review was strengthened through the use of multiple databases, explicit search terms, predetermined eligibility criteria, systematic screening, quality appraisal, structured data extraction, and PRISMA-based reporting. Since the study relied exclusively on existing scholarly literature and did not involve human participants or identifiable personal data, direct participant-related ethical

approval was not required; nevertheless, academic integrity was maintained through accurate citation, faithful representation of authors' findings, and avoidance of plagiarism or misrepresentation of evidence.

The evidence was synthesized thematically and narratively. Major themes included strategic direction, human-capital development, organizational culture, resource management, strategic decision-making, innovation, organizational learning, ethical leadership, governance, strategic adaptability, change leadership, stakeholder engagement, strategic controls, organizational performance, resilience, sustainability, indigenous leadership, Ubuntu, and digital transformation (Singh et al., 2023; Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024).

Methodological Quality

The quality of included studies was considered in relation to clarity of objectives, appropriateness of research design, adequacy of samples or evidence, transparency of data collection and analysis, and consistency between findings and conclusions. Particular attention was given to the methodological limitations of cross-sectional studies because such designs establish associations more readily than long-term causal relationships.

Ethical Considerations

The review adhered to principles of academic integrity, accurate attribution, transparency, responsible interpretation, and avoidance of plagiarism. Since the study relied on publicly available literature and did not involve direct interaction with human participants or collection of personally identifiable information, human-subject ethical approval was not required.

Nevertheless, sources were acknowledged accurately and contradictory evidence was retained rather than selectively excluded. The next section employed a narrative review methodology to synthesize, and critically interpret the identified scholarship as findings of the study.

FINDINGS

Evolution of strategic leadership

Leadership scholarship has progressively evolved from an initial emphasis on individual leader characteristics, traits, and behaviours toward a broader understanding of leadership as a contextual and strategic process concerned with organizational direction, adaptation, capability development, and long-term value creation (Singh et al., 2023). Within this evolution, strategic leadership has emerged as a comprehensive construct extending beyond the exercise of authority or supervision to encompass vision formulation, strategic decision-making, governance, innovation, organizational capabilities, resource alignment, and leadership succession. Strategic leaders are increasingly expected to interpret complex environmental developments, anticipate emerging opportunities and threats, establish coherent strategic direction, align organizational resources with strategic priorities, develop organizational capabilities, shape adaptive cultures, and facilitate effective responses to change (Singh et al., 2023). This evolution reflects the growing recognition that organizational effectiveness depends not only on the personal qualities of leaders but also on their capacity to connect leadership decisions with changing internal and external environments.

The transition from traditional to strategic leadership has become particularly significant in contemporary organizations characterized by technological disruption, globalization, changing stakeholder expectations, institutional uncertainty, and increasingly complex competitive environments. Consequently, strategic leadership is increasingly understood not as a single leadership style but as a system of interconnected capabilities and processes through which leaders influence organizational direction, strategic choices, innovation, competitiveness, resilience, and sustainable performance. Recent scholarship demonstrates that the field has expanded to incorporate areas such as digital transformation, innovation, competitive advantage, upper-echelons perspectives, strategic choices, strategic leadership teams, and succession planning (Singh et al., 2023). From an African perspective, this evolution is especially important because leaders operate within diverse and rapidly changing institutional, cultural, economic, technological, and societal contexts. Strategic leadership therefore requires the capacity to integrate global management knowledge with contextual understanding, indigenous perspectives, ethical responsibility, and locally appropriate approaches to organizational development and sustainable value creation.

Contemporary Drivers of Strategic Leadership

Contemporary strategic leadership is increasingly shaped by digital transformation, sustainability, and growing stakeholder complexity. Digital transformation has become a major driver because technological developments influence organizational structures, business models, operational processes, stakeholder relationships, decision-making, and sources of competitive advantage (Singh et al., 2023; AfDB, 2024). Strategic leaders are therefore required not only to adopt emerging technologies but

also to develop the organizational capabilities, cultures, and human competencies necessary to derive sustainable value from digital transformation. At the same time, sustainability has become an integral component of strategic leadership as organizations face increasing expectations to balance economic performance with social responsibility, environmental stewardship, institutional resilience, and long-term societal value (AfDB, 2025). This broader understanding requires leaders to integrate sustainability considerations into strategic planning, resource allocation, innovation, governance, and organizational performance.

The contemporary strategic leadership environment is further characterized by complex stakeholder relationships, uncertainty, disruption, and rapid environmental change. Organizations increasingly operate within interconnected networks involving employees, customers, communities, governments, regulators, suppliers, investors, development partners, and other interest groups, requiring leaders to manage diverse and sometimes competing expectations while maintaining organizational legitimacy and strategic focus (UNDP, 2024; Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). In such environments, adaptability and dynamic capabilities have become critical strategic leadership requirement. Dynamic capabilities enable organizations to sense environmental changes, seize emerging opportunities, reconfigure resources, and modify organizational processes and strategic behaviours in response to changing conditions (Drago et al., 2023). Consequently, effective strategic leadership increasingly depends on the ability to anticipate disruption, facilitate innovation, mobilize organizational resources, strengthen resilience, and continuously adapt strategies to changing technological, economic, institutional, environmental, and societal conditions.

The African Context and the Need for Strategic Leadership

African organizations operate within highly diverse institutional, cultural, economic, political, technological, and environmental contexts, requiring leaders to navigate multiple and interconnected challenges simultaneously (UNDP, 2024). Strategic leaders must respond to resource constraints, institutional capacity limitations, technological transformation, governance challenges, environmental pressures, human-capital development needs, and increasing competitive demands. These conditions require leadership approaches that are not only strategically oriented but also sufficiently adaptive and context-sensitive to address the distinctive realities of African organizations. Strategic leadership therefore involves the capacity to interpret complex environments, establish appropriate strategic priorities, mobilize resources, develop organizational capabilities, and align organizational action with long-term institutional and societal objectives.

The African Economic Outlook 2025 emphasizes that Africa possesses considerable underutilized human, natural, financial, and entrepreneurial capital, but that realizing the value of these resources requires stronger institutions, improved governance, transparent public financial management, and responsible resource utilization (AfDB, 2025). This observation reinforces the central role of strategic leadership in converting available resources into sustainable organizational and developmental outcomes. African strategic leaders must therefore combine strategic foresight with effective resource mobilization, institutional capability development, ethical governance, innovation, and stakeholder collaboration. The African context consequently provides a distinctive environment in which strategic leadership is not merely concerned with organizational competitiveness but

also with institutional strengthening, sustainable development, social responsibility, and the effective transformation of scarce resources into long-term value.

Recent empirical evidence demonstrates the growing relevance of strategic leadership to organizational performance across different African sectors. In Kenya, Abdi et al. (2024) examined strategic leadership and organizational performance among 313 employees in charitable NGOs and reported evidence of a relationship between strategic leadership and organizational performance. Kiende and Muthimi (2024), studying dairy-processing firms in Nairobi, operationalized strategic leadership through organizational core competencies, organizational culture, organizational processes, and networking and found that these dimensions were relevant to organizational performance. Similarly, Lengingiro et al. (2024) reported a strong positive relationship between strategic leadership and organizational performance in Kenyan universities, identifying strategic vision and strategic planning as important components of effective leadership. Evidence from Kenyan public hospitals further indicates that strategic leadership has implications for organizational performance, employee outcomes, and customer satisfaction (Kinyua, 2024).

The evidence extends beyond conventional business organizations to faith-based, financial, and public-sector institutions. Ouma and Muthimi (2024) found a statistically significant relationship between balanced organizational controls, conceptualized as an aspect of strategic leadership, and organizational performance among selected churches affiliated with the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya, with balanced organizational controls explaining 52.8% of the variance in organizational performance. Similarly, research involving Tier III commercial

banks in Nairobi reported a statistically significant positive influence of strategic-leadership dimensions on organizational performance (Kamau & Wambua, 2025). Evidence from Wajir County Government also links strategic direction, human-capital development, ethical practices, and organizational culture with organizational performance (Ali & Njuguna, 2025). Collectively, these studies demonstrate that strategic leadership is relevant across private, public, educational, health, nonprofit, financial, and faith-based organizations. However, considerable variation exists in how strategic leadership is operationalized, indicating continuing conceptual and measurement fragmentation within African scholarship.

Indigenous African Leadership as a Strategic Resource

Contemporary African leadership scholarship increasingly recognizes that leadership effectiveness cannot be adequately understood without considering cultural, historical, institutional, and societal contexts (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Indigenous leadership perspectives provide alternative approaches to understanding authority, responsibility, relationships, ethics, community, and collective wellbeing. Rather than viewing leadership primarily as an individual capacity exercised through formal authority, many indigenous African perspectives emphasize relational responsibility, consultation, social cohesion, moral authority, community participation, and stewardship.

These principles can complement contemporary strategic leadership by emphasizing that organizational effectiveness is embedded within relationships among leaders, employees, communities, institutions, and wider society. Indigenous African leadership can therefore provide a contextual foundation for strategic

leadership by encouraging leaders to consider not only organizational objectives but also the social and ethical consequences of strategic decisions. Integrating indigenous perspectives into strategic leadership theory may consequently contribute to more culturally responsive, ethically grounded, and socially legitimate leadership practices within African organizations.

Ubuntu has emerged as one of the most influential African contributions to contemporary leadership scholarship. Recent scholarship conceptualizes Ubuntu as a framework for responsible leadership based on interconnectedness, human dignity, ethical responsibility, reconciliation, mutual respect, and collective wellbeing (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Ubuntu challenges highly individualistic conceptions of leadership by emphasizing the interconnected nature of human relationships and the responsibility of leaders to promote the wellbeing of others. Research involving Nigerian private-sector enterprises similarly indicates that Ubuntu represents an African leadership orientation that incorporates elements of servant leadership while maintaining distinctive cultural characteristics (2024).

Ubuntu contributes to strategic leadership by strengthening dimensions such as relational intelligence, stakeholder consideration, ethical responsibility, trust, collaboration, and collective outcomes. These characteristics are particularly relevant in complex African organizations where strategic decisions have consequences for employees, communities, customers, governments, and other stakeholders. Ubuntu can therefore be viewed not simply as a cultural philosophy but as a potential strategic resource for developing responsible, relational, and contextually appropriate leadership approaches.

Harambee provides an important East African example of indigenous collective action and resource mobilization. Its emphasis on working together toward shared objectives offers a useful conceptual foundation for understanding collaborative strategic action, collective ownership, stakeholder participation, and resource mobilization. The principle demonstrates how individuals and communities can pool resources, skills, and efforts to pursue objectives that may be difficult to achieve individually.

Contemporary African development literature similarly emphasizes collaboration, partnerships, resource mobilization, entrepreneurship, and institutional cooperation as essential to addressing complex development challenges (AfDB, 2025; UNDP, 2024). Harambee can therefore be interpreted as an indigenous resource for understanding participatory and collaborative dimensions of strategic leadership. Its relevance extends to contemporary organizations where leaders increasingly need to mobilize diverse stakeholders, develop partnerships, leverage limited resources, and create collective commitment around shared strategic objectives.

Leading Organizational Transformation

Organizational transformation requires leaders to align strategy, people, technology, culture, structures, and resources around changing institutional priorities (Singh et al., 2023). Strategic leadership becomes particularly important when organizations are required to modify established structures, processes, business models, and organizational routines in response to technological, economic, environmental, or institutional changes. Leaders must therefore provide strategic direction while simultaneously managing resistance, building organizational readiness, developing

employee capabilities, and ensuring that transformation initiatives remain aligned with organizational purpose.

African organizations face transformation pressures associated with digitalization, globalization, regulatory change, climate change, economic restructuring, and changing stakeholder expectations (AfDB, 2024, 2025). These pressures require leaders to develop adaptive organizational cultures and capabilities that support continuous transformation. Strategic leaders must consequently combine strategic foresight with change management, innovation, stakeholder engagement, resource prioritization, and organizational learning to ensure that transformation produces sustainable rather than temporary improvements.

Strategic Leadership and Organizational Resilience

Organizational resilience refers to the capacity of organizations to anticipate disruptions, respond effectively to challenges, learn from experience, and adjust structures, processes, and strategies in changing environments. Recent research on dynamic capabilities indicates that organizations can strengthen their capacity to respond to environmental change by developing capabilities that enable them to modify processes and strategic behaviours in response to changing conditions (Drago et al., 2023). Strategic leadership is central to this process because leaders determine how organizations interpret environmental threats, allocate resource, encourage learning, and redesign organizational responses.

Resilience is particularly important within African organizations that frequently operate under conditions of resource constraints, institutional uncertainty, technological disruption, economic

volatility, and environmental pressures. Strategic leaders contribute to organizational resilience through resource prioritization, innovation, scenario thinking, partnerships, knowledge sharing, employee development, and adaptive decision-making. Resilient strategic leadership therefore enables organizations not only to survive disruption but also to learn from it and develop new capabilities for future growth and sustainability.

Digital Organizational Transformation

Digital transformation has become increasingly central to African organizational development because digital technologies provide opportunities for economic diversification, entrepreneurship, innovation, improved service delivery, and expanded access to markets and services (AfDB, 2024). Technologies such as artificial intelligence, cloud computing, mobile platforms, automation, data analytics, and digital financial systems are transforming organizational processes and creating new possibilities for value creation. These developments require leaders to rethink traditional organizational structures and develop capabilities that enable technology to contribute meaningfully to strategic objectives.

Strategic leadership is therefore necessary to ensure that digital transformation is treated as an organizational and strategic initiative rather than simply a technology project. Leaders must align digital investments with organizational strategy, develop employee competencies, strengthen organizational culture, address ethical and cybersecurity concerns, and ensure stakeholder inclusion. Research on digital workplaces indicates that digital leadership capability contributes to successful digital transformation and organizational outcomes (2023). Effective digital strategic leadership consequently requires the integration

of technological competence, organizational learning, human-capital development, innovation, governance, and strategic alignment.

Strategic Leadership in Public-Sector Organizations

Strategic leadership in public-sector organizations involves aligning institutional priorities with public value, accountability, citizen expectations, resource constraints, and long-term development objectives. African governance evidence emphasizes the need for stronger institutions, accountable governance, transparent public financial management, and effective resource utilization (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025). Public-sector strategic leaders must therefore balance political, institutional, economic, and social expectations while ensuring that public resources are used efficiently and ethically.

Ethical governance is consequently a central component of public-sector strategic leadership. Recent scholarship on Ubuntu ethical leadership proposes that African public-sector leadership can be strengthened by integrating contemporary leadership practices with African cultural and ethical traditions (2025). Such an approach emphasizes integrity, accountability, relational responsibility, community wellbeing, transparency, and responsible stewardship. Strategic leadership in the public sector should therefore extend beyond administrative efficiency to encompass institutional trust, ethical decision-making, public participation, sustainable resource management, and the creation of long-term public value.

Strategic Leadership in Private-Sector Organizations

Strategic leadership in the private sector increasingly emphasizes innovation, organizational capabilities, resource mobilization, digital transformation, competitive positioning, strategic partnerships, and organizational adaptability (Singh et al., 2023). Leaders must continuously monitor markets, technological developments, customer expectations, regulatory environments, and competitive pressures while ensuring that organizational resources and capabilities are aligned with strategic objectives. This makes strategic foresight, innovation, organizational learning, and adaptive decision-making important sources of competitive advantage.

Recent Kenyan evidence demonstrates the relevance of strategic leadership in financial institutions, dairy-processing firms, banking, and other private-sector organizations (Kiende & Muthimi, 2024; Kamau & Wambua, 2025). Strategic partnerships also provide important mechanisms for innovation, resource mobilization, and organizational resilience because organizations increasingly operate within interconnected ecosystems rather than as isolated entities. African development evidence emphasizes partnerships, entrepreneurship, innovation, and domestic resource mobilization as important contributors to sustainable development (AfDB, 2025). Strategic leaders must therefore develop both internal capabilities and external networks to strengthen organizational competitiveness and sustainability.

Strategic Leadership in Higher-Education Institutions

African universities occupy strategic positions in human-capital development, research, innovation, entrepreneurship, and socio-economic transformation. Recent Kenyan evidence demonstrates

a significant positive relationship between strategic leadership and university organizational performance (Lengingiro et al., 2024). Strategic leadership in higher education requires leaders to establish clear institutional vision, strengthen research and innovation, develop human capital, diversify resources, build stakeholder partnerships, and enhance organizational adaptability.

Digital transformation is becoming particularly important because universities increasingly depend on digital learning platforms, research technologies, artificial intelligence, learning analytics, virtual engagement, and digital knowledge resources. Strategic leaders in higher education must therefore balance academic quality, technological innovation, financial sustainability, research competitiveness, student needs, regulatory expectations, and societal responsibilities. Effective strategic leadership can position universities not only as educational institutions but also as important engines of innovation, entrepreneurship, knowledge creation, and national development.

Strategic Leadership in Health Organizations

Health organizations require strategic leadership because health systems must respond simultaneously to changing disease patterns, technological developments, workforce challenges, resource limitations, demographic changes, and increasing stakeholder expectations. Evidence from Kenyan public hospitals indicates that strategic leadership has implications for organizational performance, employee outcomes, and customer satisfaction (Kinyua, 2024). Strategic leaders in healthcare must therefore integrate clinical priorities with organizational strategy, resource management, workforce development, technology, quality improvement, and patient-centred service delivery.

Effective strategic health leadership also requires evidence-based decision-making, stakeholder coordination, organizational learning, and resilience. Leaders must anticipate emerging health challenges, develop capable health workforces, mobilize resources, strengthen institutional partnerships, and ensure ethical governance. In resource-constrained environments, strategic leadership is particularly important because leaders must prioritize competing needs while maintaining quality, equity, accountability, and sustainability.

Strategic Leadership in Faith-Based Organizations

Faith-based organizations constitute important institutional actors within African communities because they contribute not only to spiritual formation but also to education, healthcare, humanitarian assistance, community development, social welfare, and social transformation. Strategic leadership in such organizations must therefore balance mission effectiveness with organizational sustainability, responsible stewardship, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. Effective leadership requires integrating spiritual purpose with sound organizational systems and strategic planning.

Recent Kenyan evidence demonstrates that strategic controls are significantly associated with organizational performance among churches affiliated with the Evangelical Alliance of Kenya (Ouma & Muthimi, 2024). This suggests that faith-based organizations require strategic systems involving planning, performance monitoring, resource stewardship, accountability, organizational learning, and continuous improvement alongside spiritual and pastoral leadership. Strategic leadership can consequently strengthen the capacity of faith-based organizations to translate mission and vision into sustainable institutional and community impact.

Digital Leadership in African Organizations

Digital transformation has become a major component of strategic leadership because technologies such as artificial intelligence, data analytics, cloud computing, mobile platforms, automation, and digital financial systems increasingly influence organizational strategy, operations, communication, and service delivery (Singh et al., 2023; AfDB, 2024). Digital leadership therefore requires leaders to understand not only the technological possibilities available to their organizations but also the organizational, human, ethical, and strategic implications of technology adoption.

The role of digital leaders extends beyond technology acquisition to include organizational readiness, employee capability development, innovation, cybersecurity, ethical technology use, stakeholder inclusion, and strategic alignment. Africa's expanding digital economy demonstrates the strategic significance of these capabilities. The African Development Bank identifies digital technologies as important opportunities for economic diversification, entrepreneurship, innovation, and improved access to services (AfDB, 2024). Strategic leaders must therefore ensure that digital transformation contributes to organizational objectives while addressing digital inequality, institutional capacity, skills gaps, ethical risks, and sustainability.

Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Strategic Leadership

Artificial intelligence is increasingly transforming organizational decision-making, forecasting, automation, knowledge management, customer service, productivity, and organizational intelligence. At the same time, contemporary AI scholarship identifies significant concerns relating to privacy, algorithmic bias, accountability, transparency, cybersecurity, employment, and unequal

access (Dwivedi et al., 2023). These developments place new responsibilities on strategic leaders, who must balance technological innovation with ethical governance and organizational responsibility.

Strategic leadership in the AI era therefore requires leaders to establish systems that ensure AI adoption is aligned with organizational objectives, human values, stakeholder interests, and regulatory requirements. For Africa, responsible AI leadership must additionally consider local institutional capacity, digital inequality, skills development, indigenous knowledge, data governance, and equitable participation in the digital economy. AI should consequently be treated not simply as a technological innovation but as a strategic, ethical, human-capital, and institutional leadership challenge.

African Leadership Perspectives in Global Leadership Theory

African leadership experiences contribute to global leadership scholarship by demonstrating that leadership is shaped by cultural, institutional, historical, and societal contexts. Recent Ubuntu scholarship, for example, challenges highly individualistic interpretations of leadership by emphasizing relationality, ethical responsibility, collective wellbeing, mutual respect, and human dignity (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). This perspective demonstrates that leadership effectiveness can be understood through both individual and relational dimensions.

African strategic leadership can therefore enrich global leadership theory by integrating strategic competence with relational responsibility, ethical governance, community engagement, resilience, contextual intelligence, and collective responsibility. African experiences demonstrate that effective strategic leadership must

be sensitive to institutional and cultural environments rather than assuming that leadership practices are universally transferable without adaptation.

Ubuntu as a Global Leadership Contribution

Ubuntu represents a particularly important African contribution to global leadership scholarship because it provides a framework for understanding responsible leadership through human interconnectedness and collective wellbeing (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). Its emphasis on dignity, mutual responsibility, relationships, reconciliation, and community provides an alternative to leadership models that prioritize individual achievement and competition.

The relevance of Ubuntu extends beyond Africa because organizations globally face challenges involving social inequality, sustainability, diversity, stakeholder complexity, declining institutional trust, and the need for responsible organizational behaviour. A relational leadership philosophy emphasizing human dignity, mutual responsibility, and collective flourishing can therefore provide useful insights for global organizations seeking more ethical and sustainable forms of leadership.

African Innovation, Resilience, and Sustainable Development

African organizations increasingly demonstrate how innovation can emerge under conditions of resource constraints and environmental uncertainty. Digital finance, mobile technologies, entrepreneurship, health innovations, renewable-energy initiatives, and community-based solutions demonstrate the capacity of African leaders and organizations to combine innovation with contextual problem-solving (AfDB, 2024). Such experiences

challenge deficit-oriented interpretations of African organizational capacity and demonstrate the potential for resource constraints to stimulate creative and locally appropriate solutions.

The African Economic Outlook 2025 further emphasizes the importance of entrepreneurship, human capital, natural resources, financial capital, and business capabilities as strategic assets for sustainable development (AfDB, 2025). African strategic leadership can therefore contribute to global scholarship by demonstrating how leaders can mobilize constrained resources, develop adaptive capabilities, build collaborative networks, and generate innovative solutions that respond to complex social and economic challenges.

The systematic review found that strategic leadership in Africa has increasingly evolved from a predominantly leader-centred and operational orientation toward a multidimensional organizational capability encompassing strategic direction, human capital, organizational culture, resource management, strategic decision-making, innovation, ethical governance, adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and strategic control (Singh et al., 2023). This evolution reflects the growing complexity of African organizational environments and the need for leaders who can integrate strategic thinking, organizational capabilities, technological change, ethical responsibility, and stakeholder interests.

Empirical evidence from Kenya supports the positive association between strategic leadership and organizational outcomes across several sectors. Studies involving universities, charitable NGOs, dairy-processing firms, public hospitals, commercial banks, county governments, and churches report relationships between strategic-leadership practices and organizational performance or effectiveness (Abdi et al., 2024; Kiende & Muthimi, 2024;

Lengingiro et al., 2024; Kinyua, 2024; Ouma & Muthimi, 2024; Kamau & Wambua, 2025). However, the review found that strategic leadership is strongly conditioned by contextual realities, including institutional capacity, governance, resource availability, technological transformation, organizational culture, environmental uncertainty, and sector-specific requirements (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025). The review also identified indigenous leadership as an important but comparatively underdeveloped dimension of African strategic-leadership scholarship, with Ubuntu providing significant insights into relationality, collective responsibility, ethical leadership, and human dignity (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024).

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that strategic leadership should be understood as an integrated organizational capability rather than a single leadership style. This conclusion is consistent with Singh et al. (2023), who identify strategic leadership as a broad and evolving field encompassing strategic choices, innovation, digital transformation, organizational capabilities, upper-echelons perspectives, and strategic succession. The multidimensional nature of strategic leadership is particularly relevant to African organizations because leaders must simultaneously manage strategic direction, scarce resources, organizational capabilities, stakeholder expectations, technological transformation, and institutional challenges.

The positive association between strategic leadership and organizational performance reported across Kenyan studies provides empirical support for this conceptualization. Evidence from universities, NGOs, dairy-processing firms, hospitals, banks,

county governments, and churches suggests that strategic direction, human-capital development, organizational culture, strategic controls, ethical practices, and organizational capabilities are important components of strategic leadership (Abdi et al., 2024; Kiende & Muthimi, 2024; Lengingiro et al., 2024; Ouma & Muthimi, 2024). However, the findings also demonstrate that leadership effectiveness cannot be separated from organizational and environmental context. Institutional quality, governance, resource mobilization, accountability, technological development, and changing economic environments influence the conditions under which strategic leadership is exercised (UNDP, 2024; AfDB, 2025).

The findings concerning Ubuntu further challenge purely universalist interpretations of strategic leadership. Ubuntu scholarship presents leadership as relational, ethical, socially embedded, and oriented toward collective wellbeing (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024). This suggests that African strategic leadership can combine contemporary strategic-management capabilities with indigenous principles of responsibility, community, relationality, and human dignity. Such integration provides an opportunity to develop leadership models that are simultaneously strategically effective, culturally relevant, ethically grounded, and socially responsible.

The findings on digital transformation further demonstrate that future strategic leadership must integrate technology, human capability, innovation, governance, and organizational adaptation. Africa's digital transformation agenda creates substantial opportunities for entrepreneurship, economic diversification, service delivery, and organizational innovation, but uneven infrastructure, skills, resources, and institutional readiness mean that digital transformation must be strategically governed rather

than treated simply as technological adoption (AfDB, 2024). Strategic leaders therefore need digital competence alongside strategic foresight, ethical judgement, change-management capability, and stakeholder awareness.

CONCLUSION

The systematic literature review concludes that strategic leadership has become an increasingly important organizational capability for African organizations and institutions operating within complex, uncertain, technologically dynamic, and resource-constrained environments. The evidence indicates that strategic leadership encompasses strategic direction, human-capital development, organizational culture, resource management, strategic decision-making, innovation, ethical governance, strategic adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and strategic control (Singh et al., 2023). These dimensions collectively enable organizations to interpret environmental changes, mobilize resources, develop capabilities, implement strategy, manage transformation, and sustain organizational performance.

The review further concludes that strategic leadership is positively associated with organizational performance across several African sectors, although the strength and nature of these relationships vary according to organizational, institutional, sectoral, and national contexts (Abdi et al., 2024; Kiende & Muthimi, 2024; Lengingiro et al., 2024; Ouma & Muthimi, 2024). African strategic leadership should therefore not be regarded simply as an application of theories developed elsewhere. The growing scholarship on Ubuntu demonstrates the potential for African relational, ethical, communal, and indigenous perspectives

to enrich contemporary leadership theory (Sachikonye & Ramlogan, 2024).

The future of strategic leadership in Africa will increasingly depend upon leaders who can integrate strategic foresight, digital competence, ethical governance, cultural intelligence, innovation, human-capital development, stakeholder engagement, resource stewardship, and organizational learning. Africa's development context requires leaders capable of converting considerable human, natural, financial, technological, and entrepreneurial resources into sustainable organizational and societal value (AfDB, 2025).

Future research should broaden geographical coverage beyond countries that currently dominate the literature, employ longitudinal and mixed-method designs, develop African-contextualized measurement instruments, examine mediating and moderating mechanisms, and integrate indigenous leadership knowledge into contemporary strategic-leadership theory. Such an approach would enable African leadership scholarship not merely to apply global leadership theories but also to generate concepts, evidence, and practices capable of enriching the global understanding of strategic leadership.

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BEYOND COMPLIANCE TOWARDS STRATEGIC STEWARDSHIP: REDESIGNING CORPORATE GOVERNANCE FOR SUSTAINABLE VALUE CREATION IN AFRICAN CORPORATIONS

Wilson Odiyo

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6284-1151>

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ABSTRACT

Corporate governance in African corporations is at a pivotal moment of transformation. Conventional governance frameworks, shaped largely by principal-agent theory and dominated by compliance, monitoring, and regulatory adherence, are increasingly inadequate for navigating the contemporary demands of sustainability, ethical business practice, and human rights due diligence (HRDD), pressures intensified by rapidly evolving market environments, heightened geopolitical and economic volatility, and shifting workforce expectations. This chapter argues that African corporations must move toward a strategic stewardship model that positions governance as a driver of sustainable value creation and long-term resilience, without abandoning the compliance function that remains a necessary, if no longer sufficient, foundation of governance. The central objective is to conceptualize corporate governance as an

organizational design system that intentionally shapes decision-making, behaviour, and accountability, integrating ESG considerations, HRDD processes, and stakeholder interests into the structural core of organizations. The chapter examines how boards, committees, reporting lines, and management interfaces can be redesigned to embed sustainability and ethical oversight into routine strategic and operational processes, emphasizing a shift from individual behaviour-focused interventions to structural and procedural mechanisms that produce predictable, ethical, and responsible outcomes. Drawing on agency, stewardship, stakeholder, institutional, and organizational design theories, the chapter situates these conceptual foundations within African institutional, cultural, and regulatory contexts, examining board composition and independence, sustainability and risk governance mechanisms, executive incentive structures, and accountability frameworks that align leadership incentives with long-term organizational health. Its significance lies in providing a design-driven blueprint for African corporations seeking to embed sustainability and ethical stewardship into their governance architecture, while addressing practical implementation challenges such as balancing global regulatory standards with local norms and institutional capacity constraints. Methodologically, it adopts a multidisciplinary, design-centred conceptual review, synthesizing governance scholarship, organizational design literature, regulatory analysis, and emerging ESG and HRDD standards, illustrated with reflections from African corporate contexts to show how governance redesign can reduce misconduct risk, enhance stakeholder trust, and strengthen organizational adaptability.

Keywords: *African corporations; corporate governance; ESG integration; human rights due diligence; organizational design; strategic stewardship; sustainable value creation.*

INTRODUCTION

Corporations are increasingly expected to address not only financial performance but also environmental sustainability and social responsibility. Traditional governance models rooted in shareholder primacy and compliance-based oversight are being challenged by the growing salience of systemic risks such as climate change, social inequality, and human rights violations (Aguilera et al., 2021a; Zattoni et al., 2020). As a result, governance is progressively being reconceptualized as a multidimensional system concerned with social performance, sustainable value creation, and stakeholder accountability, rather than narrow compliance, monitoring, and control aimed at safeguarding shareholder value. This challenge has grown steadily more acute over the past decade: compliance-oriented frameworks, built around agency theory's emphasis on monitoring and control, have improved transparency and formal accountability, but their scope stops short of sustainability-related demands. They are poorly equipped to manage cross-boundary Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) risks, human rights obligations, and stakeholder relationships that extend beyond an organization's legal boundaries, a limitation compounded by uneven and constrained institutional enforcement across many jurisdictions (Aguilera et al., 2021a). These limitations are not abstract. In African export-oriented sectors such as tea, horticulture, and mining, fragmented, multi-tiered value chains involving smallholders, informal workers, and subcontracted suppliers complicate oversight and accountability, and empirical studies consistently document persistent deficiencies in labour conditions, environmental management, occupational health and safety, and traceability within these value chains (Hilson, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023). International customers, particularly retailers and

brand owners in Europe and North America, have grown more attentive to the human rights and labour conditions under which agricultural and mineral products are produced, extending buyer expectations beyond price and quality to internationally recognized labour standards, including living wages, freedom of association, workplace health and safety, and the elimination of child and forced labour (ILO, 2023; OECD, 2025). These expectations are increasingly institutionalized through supplier codes of conduct, contractual sustainability clauses, third-party audits, and due diligence requirements aligned with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, exposing African producers in global value chains to heightened scrutiny and accountability that often extends deep into local and informal production settings (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026; Proforest, 2023). At the same time, corporations integrated into global value chains face growing external governance pressure, as the extraterritorial reach of international sustainability regulation transmits global standards into domestic production systems irrespective of local regulatory gaps, cultural norms, or economic realities (European Commission, 2024; Bright et al., 2020). The result is a governance burden that existing compliance-based arrangements were not designed to carry: a gap between what compliance-oriented governance was built to do and what sustainability-era stakeholders now expect of it. It is this gap that motivates this chapter's move toward strategic stewardship.

This shift is backed by emerging empirical evidence demonstrating the link between Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors and financial performance. Friede et al. (2015) and Flammer (2021), for instance, show that sustainability and improved social performance correlate positively with organiza-

tional financial outcomes, particularly through improved risk management, enhanced resilience, and lower cost of and access to capital. Sustainability, however, should not be treated as a standalone corporate exercise; its adoption, and the trade-offs it entails, must strengthen an organization's long-term competitiveness rather than serve principally to enhance corporate image, a distinction that separates ESG as a strategic imperative from ESG as a reputational exercise.

These findings have reshaped the expectations of investors, lenders, customers, and other stakeholders, positioning ESG integration as a strategic and financial imperative rather than a voluntary, philanthropic exercise. The global legal and regulatory environment has, in turn, evolved to institutionalize sustainability governance through binding legal frameworks. The European Union's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) and Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) represent this shift by imposing mandatory obligations on companies to integrate ESG and human rights considerations into governance structures, risk management, and decision-making processes, including across their value chains (European Commission, 2024). These developments reinforce a deliberate move from soft-law corporate responsibility toward more exacting and enforceable governance obligations.

In Africa, this trajectory is similarly evolving, albeit at varying speeds across jurisdictions (African Union [AU], 2015). The AU's Agenda 2063 and the principles embedded in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) increasingly acknowledge the intersection of sustainability, responsible business conduct, and long-term economic growth. Several African jurisdictions, including South Africa, whose King IV Report on Corporate Governance remains one of the most significant governance

frameworks globally, are embedding sustainability and stakeholder accountability directly into governance codes (Institute of Directors South Africa, 2016). Within this global transformation, African corporations face distinct governance challenges arising from their operation in dynamic, multifaceted institutional and social environments, compounded by structural economic dependencies rooted in their trade relationships with the Global North.

The EU remains Africa's largest trading partner, with EU–Africa goods trade valued at nearly €355 billion in 2024 (European Commission, EU, 2025). Yet this relationship is structurally asymmetric: Africa exports raw commodities to the EU but imports manufactured goods and machinery, a configuration that limits value retention on the continent and exposes African corporations to governance and sustainability standards dictated by Northern markets and regulators rather than domestically determined priorities. Set against this backdrop, Okeahalam and Akinboade (2003) argue that corporate governance structures across the globe, and in Africa in particular, have emphasized compliance with statutory requirements and voluntary codes of best practice, predominantly informed by agency theory and focused on oversight and accountability mechanisms.

Kenya, through the Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE, 2021), introduced the ESG Disclosures Guidance Manual in 2021, encouraging listed companies to integrate ESG reporting into their corporate governance frameworks. This development reflects a broader evolution in corporate reporting obligations, from an era of purely financial reporting focused exclusively on shareholder returns, through an intermediate phase of integrated reporting that sought to capture the interdependencies between financial and non-financial performance within a single report, to the current expectation of standalone annual ESG reports that are

discrete from, yet complementary to, financial performance reports. Together, these developments point to a convergent, albeit uneven, international movement toward institutionalizing ESG obligations within corporate governance systems.

These developments reveal an increasing mismatch between external sustainability expectations and the internal governance systems of many African corporations. Much as regulators, investors, and international customers increasingly demand integrated ESG governance and robust human rights due diligence (HRDD), corporate governance frameworks remain predominantly compliance-driven, fragmented, and oriented toward monitoring and shareholder vigilance rather than systemic alignment (Zattoni et al., 2020). This misalignment underpins the core problem addressed by this chapter: existing governance systems are structurally ill-suited to manage sustainability risks, value chain accountability, and long-term value creation in a rapidly evolving global context. Governance mechanisms designed primarily for compliance and financial oversight lack the organizational, strategic, and behavioural integration required to embed ESG and HRDD into core corporate decision-making (Burton et al., 2011; Aguilera et al., 2021a). Addressing this gap necessitates a shift toward strategic stewardship governance, conceptualized as an organizational design system, which directly informs and frames the chapter's statement of the problem, objectives, and methodology.

Despite the growing integration of sustainability considerations into corporate governance globally, many African corporations continue to operate within predominantly compliance-based governance systems oriented toward statutory adherence and formal accountability. Such systems have improved transparency. They remain insufficient, though, for addressing the complexity of

contemporary sustainability challenges and stakeholder expectations, particularly those related to environmental, social, and human rights risks within global value chains (Hilson, 2020; Agyemang & Castellini, 2021). This limitation has become increasingly pronounced in the context of evolving global regulatory regimes, which impose binding obligations on corporations to integrate ESG and human rights considerations into governance structures and decision-making processes across entire value chains. Empirical studies indicate that firms often struggle to operationalize such requirements, particularly in fragmented and resource-constrained environments, resulting in weak implementation of human rights due diligence (HRDD) and limited effectiveness of sustainability governance mechanisms (Bright et al., 2020).

In vast segments of the African context, these challenges are further compounded by institutional complexity and supply chain fragmentation. Evidence from sectors such as agriculture and mining highlights persistent governance shortcomings, including but not limited to inadequate labour protections, weak environmental oversight, and limited traceability (Hilson, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023). At the firm level, governance practices remain fragmented, characterized by isolated ESG initiatives, limited board level integration of sustainability expertise, and suboptimal alignment between governance structures, organizational processes, and strategic objectives.

Existing literature has examined individual governance mechanisms such as board composition, director independence, executive incentives, audit and risk oversight, and, more recently, ESG disclosure (Aguilera et al., 2021b; Zattoni et al., 2020; Flammer, 2021). What's missing is an account of governance as an integrated system. Specifically, existing studies do not adequately

explain how governance structures, organizational design elements, and sustainability objectives can be aligned to enable effective ESG and HRDD integration. This reflects a broader theoretical gap, where dominant governance frameworks, particularly the agency perspective remain insufficiently integrated with alternative perspectives such as stewardship, stakeholder, and organizational design theories.

Furthermore, there is a contextual gap in the literature, with limited empirical and conceptual work addressing how governance systems can be redesigned to respond to the unique institutional realities of African corporations operating within global regulatory and market pressures. As a result, there is inadequate guidance for firms seeking to transition from compliance-based governance toward more integrated, strategic, and sustainability-oriented models. This study seeks to address this gap by developing a strategic stewardship governance model that reconceptualizes governance as an organizational design system for enabling ESG and HRDD integration and supporting sustainable value creation.

The chapter seeks to achieve four specific objectives:

1. To conceptualize corporate governance as an organizational design system that moves beyond a compliance mechanism to one that informs strategic decision-making and the associated organizational behaviour in African organizations.
2. To integrate agency, stewardship, stakeholder, institutional, and organizational design theory into a single theoretical framework approach with capacity to ameliorate the shortcomings of compliance-based governance mechanism.

3. To assess how governance design elements including board composition and expertise, executive incentive structures, sustainability and risk governance mechanisms, and value chain accountability frameworks shape ESG and HRDD outcomes in African and comparable emerging-market corporations.
4. To formulate a strategic stewardship governance model, and determine its application to boards, players in export-oriented value chains, regulators and regional economic and commercial institutions across Africa.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is underpinned by a number of theories; stewardship theory, stakeholder theory, institutional theory, and organizational design theory. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide the conceptual architecture for reconceptualizing corporate governance as a strategic, systemic, and sustainability-oriented organizational design function, rather than a compliance-driven oversight mechanism.

Agency theory

Agency theory originated from the foundational work of Jensen and Meckling (1976). It focuses on the governance challenge arising from the separation of ownership and control in corporations, where interests of shareholders (principals) and directors and managers (agents) often conflict, necessitating arrangements aimed at safeguarding the interests of principals. These safeguards include but are not limited to board oversight structures, executive compensation arrangements, and disclosure requirements to align, to the greatest extent possible, agent

actions and behaviour with principal objectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). The theory's basic assumption is that agents are inherently self-interested and that this interest conflicts with shareholder value maximization as the primary organizational and shareholder objective. Corporate governance therefore comes in as a tool of financial accountability (Fama & Jensen, 1983). From the foregoing, agency theory provides the baseline for understanding why existing governance systems in African corporations are by and large compliance-oriented and geared towards monitoring and control.

Agency theory runs into trouble on two fronts: a narrow view of human motivation, and an almost exclusive focus on financial performance. This makes it inadequate to address all-encompassing systemic sustainability risks and other emerging business and organizational challenges such as climate change, human rights violations, and supply chain expectations (Aguilera et al., 2021a). It has further produced governance frameworks that are formally compliant yet somewhat misaligned with local institutional realities (Okeahalam & Akinboade, 2003). Agency theory nonetheless remains active in African governance research: Ntim and Osei (2011) examined board governance and firm performance in South Africa, and Flammer (2021) traced how ESG-linked executive incentives shape sustainability outcomes. Both of these studies bear directly on the variables examined here.

Stewardship theory

The Stewardship theory posits that managers are intrinsically motivated by collective organizational objectives rather than narrow self-interest, and that governance functions most effectively as a system of empowerment and trust rather than constraint and control (Davis, Schoorman, & Donaldson, 1997). It

assumes that if provided with appropriate decision-making autonomy and support, agents will act as stewards of long-term organizational value, in sync with the interests of their principals. This is especially important in African institutional environments where community embeddedness and relational social capital play significant roles in ensuring organizational licence to operate. This study makes use of the stewardship perspective in conceptualizing strategic stewardship governance as an alternative to compliance-based models. Its emphasis on sustainability culture, board-level commitment to ESG integration, and long-term value orientation aligns well with and justifies the use of Stewardship theory.

Its assumptions about managerial motivation, though, offer little protection where institutions are weak (Rwegasira, 2000). In addition, the theory offers limited guidance for navigating the structural constraints, including resource limitations, regulatory restrictions, and emerging global value chain complexity, that African corporations routinely encounter (Hernandez, 2012). Its relevance in sustainability contexts, however, remains crucial. A study by Arora and Dharwadkar (2011) demonstrated that stewardship-oriented boards produce stronger corporate social responsibility outcomes. Jamali et al. (2008) applied stewardship perspectives to governance and CSR in emerging market firms, providing a relevant empirical reference for the present study.

Stakeholder theory

Developed by Freeman (1984) and extended by Harrison et al. (2020), Stakeholder theory sees the corporation's legitimacy and long-term viability as dependent on its capacity to create value for a diverse group of stakeholders. For a typical organization, such

stakeholders include but are not limited to employees, neighbouring communities, the government through regulatory authorities, suppliers, and customers. This perspective contradicts the shareholder-primacy assumption of agency theory to the extent that it proposes that governance systems that are responsive to multiple legitimate stakeholder interests are associated with sustainable corporate performance (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). For this chapter, stakeholder theory is crucial for framing ESG and HRDD integration as an important governance enabler rather than a whimsical exercise. It therefore provides the justification for extending corporate responsiveness, transparency and accountability beyond shareholders to include supply chain owners and workers, host communities, national and international regulatory bodies. The tensions arising from competing domestic and international stakeholder demands, the value chain accountability mechanisms including living wage obligations, responsible business sourcing, and community engagement protocols, among others, are framed by this theory as legitimate governance concerns.

Where the theory struggles is adjudication: it says little about how to prioritize among competing, legitimate stakeholder claims (Jensen, 2002). Furthermore, diversity and informality of stakeholders, especially in the African agriculture and mining value chains, complicate its application (UNCTAD, 2023). Empirically, Flammer and Bansal (2017) demonstrated that stakeholder-oriented governance positively predicts sustainability investment, and Agyemang and Castellini (2021) applied the framework to identify significant gaps between formal stakeholder commitments and substantive ESG integration in Ghanaian listed firms.

Institutional theory

The institutional theory is rooted in the contributions of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Scott (2001). The proponents of the theory hold that organizations are shaped by happenings in their external environment. The environment exerts all sorts of pressures: legal and regulatory; professional standards and industry norms; perceived industry leaders. This theory is therefore relevant to understanding the governance transformation pressures facing African export orientated corporations. For instance, notwithstanding domestic regulatory regimes, EU sustainability legislation including the CSRD, CSDDD exerts powerful coercive influence on ESG and HRDD governance of African production systems. At the same time, pressures from international investors and buyers constantly impact governance expectations across the continent. Institutional theory thus explains why ESG governance integration is no longer a matter of voluntary organizational choice but a ready response to an ever-changing environment.

Institutional theory leans too heavily on structural conformity, at the expense of organizational agency (Oliver, 1991), and its prediction of convergence sits in tension with the documented diversity of governance practices across African institutional environments characterized by hybridity and uneven enforcement (Khanna & Palepu, 1997). Applied to the African context, Amaeshi et al. (2016) demonstrated the role of both global and local institutional forces in shaping CSR governance in Nigerian corporations. Aluchna and Idowu (2017), on the other hand, found that coercive regulatory pressures exerted the strongest influence on ESG disclosure adoption across emerging market firms.

Organizational design theory

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), Galbraith (1974), and Burton et al. (2011) conceptualize organizations as systems of structured interdependent parts consisting of strategy, structure, processes, incentives, people, and culture that must be coherently aligned to achieve organizational objectives. Its central principle asserts that organizational performance is maximized when design elements are not only internally consistent and coherent but also aligned with external environmental conditions, and therefore changes in one element necessitate corresponding adaptations across the system to maintain coherence. It provides the theoretical framework upon which the chapter's proposed governance model is anchored. Rather than treating ESG and HRDD integration as a matter of appending discrete mechanisms to existing compliance structures, organizational design theory frames governance redesign as a systemic challenge requiring the realignment of board competencies, executive incentive systems, risk management processes, reporting frameworks, and organizational culture into a coherent sustainability-oriented architecture.

Two limits stand out: the theory's claim to universal prescription sits awkwardly with African organizational settings (Donaldson, 2001), and applying it across complex, multi level governance systems is genuinely hard to do. Even so, it remains useful. Eccles et al. (2014) found that high-sustainability firms exhibit coherent organizational design systems that embed sustainability. Burton et al. (2011), on the other hand, found that governance structures must be coherent with strategy and the external environment to produce favourable outcomes, evidence that underpins the strategic stewardship governance model proposed in this study.

Theory Integration

The five theoretical perspectives above are mutually supporting: together they explain the governance transformation challenge this study addresses. Agency theory explains why African corporate governance systems have been built around compliance, monitoring, and shareholder accountability and why that architecture no longer meets current sustainability expectations. Stewardship theory offers an alternative grounded in trust, long-term orientation, and directors' intrinsic commitment to organizational value. Stakeholder theory widens the frame to the full set of relationships African corporations must manage; institutional theory then explains the external pressure driving change, as global regulatory regimes and market expectations reshape the governance environment for firms operating in international value chains. Organizational design theory closes the loop, translating these insights into a redesigned framework: strategic stewardship governance as a coherent system of aligned structures, processes, incentives, and culture geared toward sustainable value creation. Together, the five theories explain the origins and limits of existing governance arrangements, identify the pressures demanding transformation, and supply the design logic for a governance model that is strategic, integrated, and responsive to African corporations' institutional realities.

METHODOLOGY

The chapter adopts an integrated conceptual review methodology, appropriate for the objective of conceptual and theory-building rather than hypothesis-testing. This approach is appropriate as it helps achieve the reconceptualization of governance as an organizational design system rather than a theoretical and

architectural one. The aim is to synthesise conceptual and empirical knowledge into a new conceptual model. The review draws on governance theoretical frameworks including agency, stewardship, stakeholder and institutional, as well as organizational design theory. Second, it draws from empirical studies on ESG-financial performance relationships, board governance, and HRDD implementation, drawn from global, African and national focused peer reviewed studies, which help ground the proposed conceptual model on scientific research rather than any assumptions. Third, it is anchored on existing and emerging regulatory and institutional frameworks such as the EU's CSDDD and CSRD, the King IV Report, and the NSE ESG Disclosures Guidance Manual to position the model within the current regulatory architecture.

Sources were identified through structured searches of Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using combinations of the terms "corporate governance," "ESG," "stewardship theory," "stakeholder theory," "institutional theory," "organizational design," "human rights due diligence," and "Africa," supplemented by targeted searches of regulatory and institutional sources (European Commission, King IV, NSE, AU, ILO, OECD, UNCTAD). The review prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles, with earlier publication dates reserved for foundational theoretical works establishing the chapter's core frameworks (e.g., Jensen & Meckling, 1976; Freeman, 1984; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Davis, Schoorman & Donaldson, 1997; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) or early empirical applications of those frameworks within governance research (e.g., Okeahalam & Akinboade, 2003; Jamali et al., 2008). The majority of empirical sources, particularly those addressing ESG-financial performance, board sustainability governance, and HRDD implementation, were concentrated in the period from 2014 onward, with a marked concentration from

2020 onward coinciding with the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) and Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), and comparable African regulatory developments including King IV and the NSE ESG Disclosures Guidance Manual.

Studies were included where they addressed governance mechanisms, ESG or HRDD outcomes, or organizational design in a manner directly relevant to the chapter's theoretical framework or African institutional context, and excluded where they addressed governance solely from a financial-reporting or audit-compliance perspective unconnected to sustainability or stakeholder considerations. Quality assurance and bias mitigation were addressed by prioritizing peer-reviewed sources over grey literature, cross-checking empirical claims against at least one additional source where possible, and excluding sources whose citation details could not be independently verified. In total, approximately fifty sources, comprising peer-reviewed empirical studies, foundational theoretical works, and regulatory and institutional documents, informed the conceptual synthesis presented in this chapter.

REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL STUDIES

This sub-section of the chapter examines relevant previous studies, highlighting the key results, methodologies used, and any gaps or limitations in the research. By synthesizing and critically evaluating the results from various studies, the chapter identifies trends, contradictions, and areas that need further investigation. Many studies consistently find a positive association between sustainability management and organizational performance,

particularly in terms of risk mitigation and long-term value creation (Friede et al., 2015). More recent studies have more precisely defined the importance of, and the relationship between, material ESG factors and industry-specific dynamics (Khan et al., 2016).

ESG Integration and Financial Performance

This sub-section addresses Objective (iii) — assessing how governance design elements shape ESG and HRDD outcomes — by first establishing the empirical case for treating ESG as a financially material governance concern rather than a peripheral one. A significant number of studies have been carried out on the relationship between ESG performance and financial outcomes over the last two decades, with the majority of them providing scientific evidence supporting a positive association between the two variables. In a comprehensive analysis aggregating results from more than 2,000 empirical studies, Friede et al. (2015) found that a majority of the studies reported a positive correlation between the variables. This holds across sectors, geographical locations, and time periods, demonstrating that ESG governance goes beyond a normative aspiration to a strategic financial imperative. The mechanisms through which ESG integration generates financial value include improved risk management, enhanced access to capital, reduced cost of debt, stronger stakeholder relationships, and greater organizational resilience in the face of systemic shocks (Flammer, 2021).

More recently, studies have gone a step further to identify the critical place of materiality which is the principle that ESG factors most financially relevant to a specific industry generate the strongest performance effects when actively managed. Companies outperforming on material ESG issues relevant to their sector

generated significantly superior risk-adjusted returns compared to firms outperforming on immaterial ESG dimensions (Khan et al., 2016). There is a cost to treating sustainability metrics as self-contained. Solar investment only makes sense once weighed against what it cost, what it saved, and what that did to the bottom line, which numbers an emissions figure alone won't show. If that step is skipped sustainability stays a reporting add-on instead of what this chapter is arguing it should be: a working part of strategy, measured through KPIs stakeholders actually care about. In the Kenyan context, Agutu and Githira (2023), in a longitudinal study examining 23 financial firms listed on the NSE over a seven-year period, found a positive and significant relationship between ESG reporting and return on equity, concluding that the financial benefits of ESG integration are realized when sustainability is embedded in corporate strategy rather than treated as a peripheral disclosure. Across eight African countries including Kenya, Hathout (2026) found that board diversity, independence, and balanced expertise strengthen the ESG-financial performance link. In practice, firms with stronger governance structures simply convert ESG commitments into financial outcomes more reliably.

The above insights have important implications for governance design. They suggest that effective ESG governance requires broad sustainability commitment as well as the strategic identification and prioritization of material risks and opportunities specific to the firm's sector and value chain context. They add an important governance dimension to the materiality argument: in the African context, the financial returns from ESG engagement are not automatic but are contingent on the quality of board-level governance integration. For African corporations operating in agriculture, horticulture, and mining in particular, where labour

conditions, environmental management, and community relations are highly material, the foregoing underscore the strategic imperative of integrating sector-specific ESG considerations into critical governance decision-making through board structures aligned to organizational design, rather than adopting generic sustainability frameworks disconnected from sectoral risk realities.

Flammer et al. (2019) found that including ESG performance metrics in executive compensation produced significant improvements in long-term corporate sustainability performance, reduced carbon emissions, and enhanced stakeholder engagement. However, the study found that the effectiveness of ESG incentives depends on their specificity, measurability, and integration into the broader governance system. Vague, unverifiable incentives disconnected from strategy simply don't move behaviour, a point the incentive alignment dimension of the strategic stewardship governance model proposed here takes seriously.

Board Governance and Sustainability Outcomes

Continuing to address Objective (iii), this sub-section examines board composition and expertise specifically as governance design elements shaping ESG oversight. Studies consistently demonstrate that board composition, diversity, and sustainability expertise shape the quality of ESG oversight and integration. Amorelli and García-Sánchez (2021) found that gender-diverse boards achieve higher levels of ESG disclosure and performance, an outcome attributed to the broader stakeholder orientation and longer-term perspective that diverse boards tend to bring to the governance deliberation table. Post and Byron (2015), in a study on board gender diversity and firm performance, found that the relationship between diversity and organizational outcomes

is stronger in stakeholder-oriented organizations. In the African agriculture and mining contexts, where community and relational stakeholder expectations are more significant, this becomes crucial. Hathout (2026), researching 147 non-financial listed companies across eight African countries including Kenya, corroborated the above in the African context, demonstrating that board structures characterized by gender diversity, independence, and balanced expertise significantly strengthen the ESG-financial performance relationship and, in the process, enable firms to translate sustainability programs into measurable financial outcomes.

Over and above gender diversity, the presence of sustainability expertise at board level has been identified as a critical governance differentiator. Boards with directors possessing substantial competencies in responsible business conduct, including environmental management, human rights, supply chain governance, and sustainability, are better positioned to provide meaningful oversight of ESG risks and to integrate sustainability considerations into strategic decision-making (Eccles et al., 2014). The institutionalization of board level sustainability oversight through dedicated committees with outright ESG mandates further strengthens governance effectiveness by creating structural accountability for sustainability performance and ensuring that ESG considerations are systematically incorporated into board deliberation (Velte, 2020).

In the East African context, this gap appears particularly pronounced. A systematic review of governance-performance relationships spanning 19 peer reviewed studies conducted across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Ethiopia found that much as board composition reforms have made significant progress in the East African region, regulatory enforcement capacity varies

substantially across each of the jurisdictions. The Kenya Capital Markets Authority demonstrates stronger compliance mechanisms than other regional regulators, which constrains the translation of governance reforms into consistent outcomes across the region (Osinde & Nyongesa, 2025). Considering the above alongside the broader pattern of limited sustainability expertise and the emerging board committees with ESG roles found across the continent (Eccles et al., 2014; Velte, 2020), it is reasonable to infer, as a conceptual extension rather than a direct empirical finding, that board-level sustainability expertise specifically remains limited across much of East Africa relative to more advanced governance environments such as South Africa.

Human Rights Due Diligence: Implementation and Challenges

This sub-section extends the assessment under Objective (iii) to human rights due diligence outcomes, the second outcome variable specified in that objective. There is a growing body of knowledge on HRDD in response to the increasing number of mandatory due diligence regulatory frameworks. Bright et al. (2020) found real progress in due diligence frameworks including human rights impact assessments, supply chain due diligence, and grievance mechanisms across a multiplicity of jurisdictions and sectors. Implementation, though, stays uneven, sometimes superficial, and largely confined to better-resourced firms. Production and social audit-based compliance approaches, which are more common, have singularly been found to be limited in their capacity to identify and address salient human rights risks, as they tend to assess formal procedural compliance rather than lived experiences and structural power imbalances within supply chains (Proforest, 2023).

The ILO (2023) further reports that decent work deficits, including on wages, unsafe conditions, and restrictions on freedom of association, remain pervasive in global agricultural supply chains, with East African export sectors among those most consistently identified as high-risk environments. This finding is somewhat at variance with an empirical study by Kabiru (2018) on trade unionism in Kenya's cut-flower industry, which confirmed the existence of organized worker representation through the Kenya Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (KPAWU), collective bargaining structures, and union engagement in workers' welfare issues. Although the study found shortcomings in union effectiveness, it nevertheless demonstrates that formal industrial relations institutions and worker representation mechanisms exist in the sector.

OECD (2025), in its mapping of efforts to protect worker rights across global supply chains, reports that buyer-driven due diligence initiatives have expanded in reach. Their effectiveness is constrained, however, wherever supplier governance systems lack the internal organizational capacity to implement and sustain remediation measures. The Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2026) highlights four categories of human rights risk particularly salient for food and agriculture companies in global value chains: labour rights violations, including wages and unsafe working conditions; land rights conflicts; gender-based discrimination and violence; and the exclusion of smallholder farmers and informal workers from value chain governance processes. These risks are directly relevant to the African agricultural and horticultural export sectors that constitute significant segments of African participation in global value chains. Addressing these risks requires governance interventions that go beyond third-party production and social audits to encompass systemic

improvements in responsible sourcing practices and supply chain due diligence, changes that this chapter proposes to achieve through the integrated, design-oriented governance structure.

Corporate Governance and Sustainability in the African Context

This sub-section grounds Objective (i) — conceptualizing governance as an organizational design system — in the specific institutional realities of African corporations; Objective (ii)'s theoretical integration is addressed earlier, in the Theoretical Framework and Theory Integration sections, rather than here. In a study on corporate governance and sustainability disclosure practices among listed firms in Ghana, Agyemang and Castellini (2021) found significant gaps between formal governance commitments and substantive ESG integration. The study identified limited board-level sustainability expertise, weak enforcement of disclosure requirements, and lack of integrated governance systems as primary drivers of these gaps. Similar gaps appear across other African jurisdictions and partly motivates the governance redesign proposed here. In Kenya specifically, the NSE's ESG Disclosures Guidance Manual (2021) tells a similar story: awareness of ESG among listed companies is growing, but disclosure quality has not kept pace, and the correlation between ESG performance and financial outcomes has yet to be systematically tracked. This shortcoming reflects the broader challenge of embedding ESG into governance structures rather than treating it purely as a reporting compliance exercise.

Okeahalam and Akinboade (2003), in a review of corporate governance across Africa, documented the structural limitations of compliance-based governance frameworks borrowed from Anglo-American institutional contexts into African business environments. The limitations arise from the fact that African

business environments are characterized by concentrated ownership, weaker shareholder protection, limited regulatory enforcement, and significant informal sector activity. These structural features create governance challenges that conventional agency-theory-derived frameworks are ill-equipped to address, necessitating governance models that acknowledge African institutional realities rather than assuming their convergence with Northern templates. Hilson (2020), examining artisanal and small-scale mining and its intersections with agriculture in rural sub-Saharan Africa, documented persistent deficiencies in environmental management, occupational health and safety, labour rights protection, and community engagement, deficiencies rooted not only in individual firm behaviour but in the structural fragmentation and informality of value chains that complicate governance oversight. UNCTAD's (2023) analysis of African participation in global value chains highlights the governance challenges arising from multi-tiered supply structures involving large numbers of smallholder producers and informal workers whose labour conditions are difficult to monitor, verify, and improve through conventional compliance mechanisms.

Amaeshi et al. (2016), on the contrary, demonstrate that African corporations are not passive recipients of global governance pressures but active navigators of multiple and sometimes conflicting institutional logics. Their study of CSR governance in Nigerian corporations found that firms simultaneously respond to global regulatory and market pressures, domestic institutional expectations, and local community demands, evidence that underscores the complexity of the governance environment facing African corporations and the inadequacy of single-logic governance frameworks. Effective governance in this context

requires the kind of multi-theoretical, design-oriented approach that this chapter develops.

Emerging Evidence on Integrated Governance Approaches

This sub-section provides the empirical foundation for Objective (iv) — the formulation of the strategic stewardship governance model — by evidencing the performance advantage of integrated over fragmented governance systems. Emerging empirical evidence shows that superior outcomes are achievable through integrated governance approaches that align ESG, HRDD, and organizational design within a coherent governance system. Eccles et al. (2014), in their landmark study of high-sustainability firms, demonstrated that companies adopting integrated governance systems characterized by board-level sustainability oversight, ESG-linked executive incentives, robust stakeholder engagement processes, and sustainability-oriented organizational cultures significantly outperformed their low-sustainability counterparts on both long-term financial performance and sustainability metrics. The study found that these outcomes were attributable not to any single governance mechanism but to the coherent alignment of multiple governance elements. In the Kenyan context, Agutu and Githira (2023) provide complementary evidence, demonstrating across 23 NSE-listed financial firms that the financial benefits of ESG are most consistently realized where sustainability reporting is embedded in corporate strategy and governance systems rather than treated as a standalone disclosure obligation. These results support the integration imperative at the heart of this chapter's argument.

Earlier, Surroca et al. (2010) had found that the relationship between corporate social responsibility and financial performance is mediated by organizational intangible resources includ-

ing human capital, relational capital, innovation capacity, and reputational assets all of which are themselves products of integrated governance systems. Surroca et al.'s (2010) findings suggest ESG governance builds financial value less through discrete compliance activity than through organizational capability built up over time, capability that in turn supports resilience, stakeholder trust, and long-term competitive positioning. For African corporations navigating domestic institutional constraints alongside international sustainability expectations, this evidence supports moving from compliance-based governance toward the stewardship model proposed here.

From the empirical analysis, it emerges that there is limited empirical and conceptual work addressing how governance systems can be redesigned to respond to the unique institutional realities of African corporations operating under global regulatory and market pressures (Okeahalam & Akinboade, 2003; Amaeshi et al., 2016). More specifically to East Africa, there is little evidence of attempts to build board-level sustainability expertise. The available evidence on East African governance (Osinde & Nyongesa, 2025) documents uneven regulatory enforcement and incomplete board composition reforms. Finally, the sectoral evidence base, though consistent in documenting governance deficiencies in tea, horticulture, and mining value chains (Hilson, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023; Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026), offers limited guidance on how governance systems can be redesigned across sectors with distinct risk profiles. Labour, traceability, environmental, and community-relations risks dominate agriculture, horticulture, and mining in varying degrees. A single governance template is therefore unlikely to serve all equally well. This chapter's model is deliberately architectural

rather than sector-specific, leaving sector calibration to the proposed case research.

Implications for African Corporate Governance

The strategic stewardship governance model advanced in this chapter has implications for composition of boards of directors, corporations operating within global value chains, and regulatory and regional institutions.

For boards, the model's central implication is that there is need for changed governance structures to accommodate ESG and human rights due diligence (HRDD) integration. Creating committees charged with the responsibility for sustainability is a good start but does not go far enough. Sustainability competence and experience must be core recruitment criteria alongside financial and industry expertise for directors. Eccles et al. (2014) argue that this will ensure directors can interrogate and contribute meaningfully to ESG matters as opposed to just endorsing management-prepared ESG reports. This has direct implications for nomination committees and continuing board education across the continent, where sustainability expertise at board level has remained scarce.

Secondly, the alignment of executive incentive structures with sustainability objectives needs attention. According to Flammer et al. (2019), empirical evidence indicates that ESG-linked remuneration produces meaningful behavioural change only where metrics are specific, verifiable, and embedded within the broader performance management system. Measuring sustainability apart from financial and operational results invites overreach claims that get ahead of what the business can actually back up. Grounding sustainability performance in verifiable business outcomes tightens governance design, and it is also the clearest

defence against greenwashing exposure: it forces African corporations to substantiate their sustainability positions rather than assert them. African corporations seeking to operationalize strategic stewardship should therefore resist symbolic or token ESG bonuses not strictly aligned to material organizational and sector risks, and instead anchor incentives on indicators that reflect the specific sustainability exposures of their organizations and/or industry, whether those be labour, environmental, or community and stakeholder management (Hilson, 2020; UNCTAD, 2023).

For export-oriented organizations operating in such value chains as tea, horticulture, and mining, the model implies a shift from the boundary of the company to the boundary of the value chain. Because many salient human rights risks are concentrated among smallholders, informal workers, and subcontracted suppliers who fall outside conventional corporate reporting lines and culture (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2026; Proforest, 2023), governance models need to extend downstream through supplier codes of conduct, capacity building for smallholder producers, and grievance mechanisms that are accessible to all cadres of workers and stakeholders, including smallholder farmers. Value chain governance becomes, on this view, a board level accountability matter rather than a procurement function because structure, incentives, and culture cannot be separated (Burton et al., 2011).

Lastly, the model has implications for how African regulatory authorities calibrate reform. EU regulation, mainly the CSDDD and CSRD, is already reshaping governance expectations within African production systems (European Commission, 2024), which implies that African regulators face a choice between passive reception of externally determined standards, on the one hand,

and proactive development of homegrown governance frameworks calibrated to local realities, on the other. The Nairobi Securities Exchange's ESG Disclosures Guidance Manual (NSE, 2021) and South Africa's King IV framework (Institute of Directors South Africa, 2016) illustrate the latter path, and provide templates that other African jurisdictions can adapt rather than adopt wholesale. Given the documented unevenness of regulatory enforcement capacity across East African jurisdictions (Osinde & Nyongesa, 2025), regulators would be better off prioritising gradual, sector-differentiated governance frameworks starting with export-oriented sectors already subject to international buyer scrutiny over uniform, one-size-fits-all disclosure mandates that risk being formally adopted but substantively unenforced (Agyemang & Castellini, 2021).

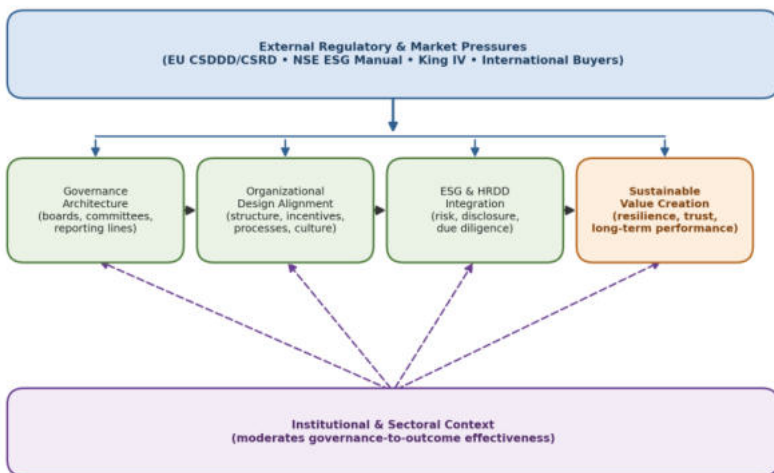
Regional frameworks have a distinct role to play in this transition. The AU's Agenda 2063 and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) provide a continental policy architecture within which harmonised sustainability and governance standards could be developed, reducing the risk that African corporations face fragmented, jurisdiction-by-jurisdiction compliance burdens while at the same time being subject to externally imposed EU standards (AU, 2015). A continentally coordinated approach potentially anchored in AfCFTA's protocols on trade facilitation and investment would allow African governance standards to reflect local and regional institutional realities and priorities, rather than positioning African corporations solely as rule-takers. It is bad enough that they are already price takers. Amaeshi et al. (2016) argue that African corporations should be active navigators of multiple institutional logics rather than passive recipients of global governance pressure, and that regional institutions can

strengthen the negotiating position of African firms and regulators within that navigation.

The foregoing suggests that the transition to strategic stewardship governance is neither purely a corporate-level nor purely a regulatory-level undertaking, but requires coordinated action across boards, sector bodies, and regional institutions, each addressing a distinct layer of the governance framework depicted in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

Strategic Stewardship Governance: Conceptual Model



Source: Author's conceptualization (2026)

CONCLUSION

It is the proposal of this chapter that compliance-based governance models are inadequate to resolve African governance challenges in an environment of intensifying sustainability and human rights expectations. Compliance-based governance has, historically, improved transparency and formal accountability for shareholders. But it is reactive by design as it monitors adherence to defined rules rather than aligning an organization's structures, processes, incentives, and culture with the constantly changing and often extraterritorial demands of ESG and HRDD. Drawing from the five theories reviewed, the study proposes strategic stewardship governance as a model that treats governance not as a monitoring function but as an organizational design system that deliberately integrates ESG and HRDD into everyday decision-making. Figure 1, presented above in the Implications section, illustrates the conceptual relationship between governance architecture, organizational design alignment, ESG and human rights due diligence (HRDD) integration, and the resulting sustainable value creation. External regulatory and market pressures act as primary drivers of governance transformation, as institutional and sectoral contexts moderate the effectiveness of governance systems.

Read against the chapter's four objectives, the review has conceptualized governance as an organizational design system rather than a compliance mechanism (Objective i); integrated agency, stewardship, stakeholder, institutional, and organizational design theory into a single framework capable of addressing the shortcomings of compliance-based governance (Objective ii); assessed how board composition, executive incentives, sustainability and risk governance mechanisms, and value chain

accountability frameworks shape ESG and HRDD outcomes in African and comparable emerging-market corporations (Objective iii); and formulated the strategic stewardship governance model together with its application to boards, value-chain participants, regulators, and regional institutions (Objective iv).

Ultimately, the transition from compliance to strategic stewardship requires African corporations, boards, and regulators to treat sustainability and human rights as an integral part of governance, rather than as an additional and incidental organizational consideration. Corporations that make this shift are better positioned not only to satisfy the external expectations of international regulators, investors, and buyers, but to build the internal organizational capabilities including resilience, stakeholder trust, and long-term strategic coherence that ultimately determine competitive advantage in global value chains and contribute to stakeholder value.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Future empirical research should now test the relationships depicted in Figure 1, particularly the mediating role of organizational design alignment between governance structure and ESG/HRDD integration, and the moderating influence of institutional context and sector characteristics across African firms and jurisdictions. Such research would allow a move from a plausible conceptual model toward an empirically validated one, offering scientific evidence of the applicable relationships between variables. This will build on the single-mechanism approach of studies such as Agutu and Githira (2023) and Hathout (2026). Secondly, given the heterogeneity of governance challenges across tea, horticulture, and mining value chains, in-depth case studies within each sector

would clarify how the model's organizational design elements should be calibrated to sector-specific risk profiles, extending the sectoral evidence base established by Hilson (2020) and UNCTAD (2023). It would be equally important to test the inference that sustainability expertise at board level remains limited across East Africa, since existing regional governance evidence (Osinde & Nyongesa, 2025) speaks to enforcement and composition reform rather than sustainability competence specifically. Advancing this agenda will require the kind of interdisciplinary collaboration spanning management scholarship, law, and sustainability science that this chapter has itself sought to model, and that the literature identifies as a persistent methodological gap in African governance research.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr. Gilbert A. Ang’ana is a leadership, governance, and policy expert with nearly 20 years of experience working with executives, boards, and institutions across Africa and Europe. He is the Founder and CEO of Accent Leadership Group, a premium advisory firm enabling leaders to influence beyond positional authority, inspire change, and lead purposefully. He also serves as Executive Director of Accent Global Initiative, a think tank advancing good governance and collaborative leadership in Africa. Dr. Ang’ana is an alumni Policy Leader Fellow at the European University Institute, Florence School of Transnational Governance, and holds a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership from Pan Africa Christian University. He has held senior leadership roles at KCB Bank Group, Co-operative Bank Group, and Airtel Africa, and serves on multiple boards. Currently, he is Dean, School of Leadership, Business, and Technology at PAC University. He is an award-winning author, international leadership coach, and globally recognised thought leader on leadership and governance.

Email: anganagilbert@gmail.com | Cellphone: +254 743990422

Dr. Theresia Mueni Mutetei is a distinguished academic, consultant, and mentor with extensive expertise in leadership and organizational development. She has a PhD in Human Resource Management, Master's in Education Administration, and Bachelor's in Education Arts. Currently she is a lecturer at Pan Africa Christian

(PAC) University in the School of Leadership, Business and Information Technology (SLBT). Theresia is a consultant in academic and business research with a focus on organizational learning and leadership at Strathmore University and PAC university and has supervised PhD and Master's students' theses to completion. She has co-authored the book chapter "*The Leader Within*" in *Wealth Footprints* (Vol. 1), has published multiple papers in peer-reviewed journals in addition to presenting papers in international conferences. A devout Christian affiliated with Christ is the Answer Ministries (CITAM), she is actively involved in mentoring youth and young couples. Driven by the belief that "there is a leader within every human being," she advocates for a future where collaborative leadership prevails across all sectors of African economies.

Email: tmuenimutetei@gmail.com | Cellphone: +254 721367750

Dr. Solomon Munyao holds a Bachelor of Theology degree, a Master of Arts in Leadership, and a Doctor of Philosophy in Organizational Leadership from Pan Africa Christian University in Nairobi, Kenya where he is currently serving as a lecturer and Head of Leadership department for the last eight years. Dr. Munyao is also a Pastor with Africa Inland Church, Kenya. He is married to Regina and God has blessed them with three children and six grandchildren. Dr. Solomon Munyao has examined and supervised many postgraduate students; some to completion. He grew a passion to mentor postgraduate students after discovering the struggles they go through in the process of writing their thesis and dissertations that culminated in a book called "A Practical Guide to Thesis and Dissertation Writing" that he co-authored with Raphael Mulonzya. He also has a passion in

strategic leadership and its contribution to organizational performance.

Email: solomon.munyao@pacuniversity.ac.ke | Cellphone: +254721575411

Dr. Wilson Odiyo is an accomplished executive with over 25 years' leadership experience in corporate governance, strategic human capital management and sustainability across multinational agricultural enterprises in East and Central Africa. Currently serving as Corporate Affairs Director at Eastern Produce Regional Services Ltd (EPRS), and as Director of Eastern Produce Kenya Limited (EPK), he provides strategic leadership in governance, ESG integration, and stakeholder relations — strengthening the company's accountability and trust among boards, employees, communities, regulators, and international markets. His leadership builds on a strong background in strategic HR and labour relations, enabling him to align governance, ethics, and performance systems with human rights and sustainability commitments. Dr. Odiyo has served on the Board of the Agricultural Employers Association (2018–2024), where he led advocacy and policy initiatives to strengthen employer compliance and labour standards within Kenya's agricultural sector. As a consultant, he has advised organizations on the alignment of human capital to competitive strategies, governance frameworks, risk management and due diligence. An active scholar and mentor, Dr. Odiyo has supervised over 30 master's and 5 Ph.D. students to completion, authored more than 20 peer-reviewed papers, and presented widely on strategic human capital development, corporate governance, and sustainability. He is a Certified Secretary (CS-K), Certified Human Resource Professional (CHRP-

K), and a Certified Professional Mediator, as well as a member of both the Institute of Certified Secretaries of Kenya (ICS-K) and the Institute of Human Resource Management (IHRM)

Email: wilsonodiyo@gmail.com | Cellphone: +254722605269

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