Characterising Leadership for Sustainable Development in Africa: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In Africa, new forms of leadership have emerged at various social levels and institutions to drive a development agenda based on peer-learning and knowledge-sharing. However, the African continent remains confronted with many challenges on its path to sustained growth and development. This research sought to characterise leadership for sustainable development. It is a case study that was informed by a purposive sample of 30 MBA students from two regions. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather data. The findings among other things were that Africa needs leadership that is not embodied in a sole heroic individual but diffuse, pluralistic, collective and facilitative leadership for sustainable development. Ability to advocate a viewpoint that is in line with the broader sustainability agenda and feminine attributes of cooperation, understanding, pluralistic knowing and seeking union align more closely with the sort of work required to develop more sophisticated, encompassing and collaborative efforts. Intimate knowledge of sustainable development, creating and sustaining relations and accommodating the particular heterogeneity and diversity of localities and regions were cited as characteristics of leaders for sustainable development. The article argues that leaders who make decisions from a long-term perspective will lead Africa towards economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

African institutions are on record as failing to take the continent to the developed status despite its varsity resources. The leadership of these institutions have been found wanting in one way or the other. However, recent research in organisational behaviour has identified a leadership theory termed transformational leadership, as most applicable to contemporary organisations and Africa can benefit from employing this practice. What appear missing though are efforts to characterise transformational leadership for Africa that will champion organisational development. The transformational leadership style is said to have a positive impact on the effectiveness of an organisation (Bass and Avolio, 1997). This is so in spite of the fact that the concept of organisational effectiveness is controversial and many contrasting views exist on the measurement of this concept. African organisational leaders operate in a fiercely competitive and dynamic environment and have the responsibility to ensure that the organisations survive and grow.

Gardner (1990:1) defines leadership as ‘the process of persuasion or example by which an individual induces a group to pursue objectives held by the leader or shared by the leader and his or her followers’. This definition of leadership was selected from among many for a purpose. One major reason for selecting this definition is that in the African context, it was often the case that post-independence national leadership was of the so-called ‘big man’ style. You may have known so many of these African leaders. In this form of leadership, decision making over the distribution of resources, power and authority was exclusively controlled by very few people at the top. It means decision making was highly centralised. However, sustainable development needs decentralisation. It is the people who live with the resources who need to appreciate that these scarce resources must be preserved.

Having defied leadership, it is important to conceptualise the concept of sustainable development. Sustainable development (SD) refers to a mode of human development in which resource use aims to meet human needs while preserving the environment so that these needs can be met not only in the present, but also for generations to come (Brown, 2011). What this means for Africa is that the term ‘sustainable development’ is referring to “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brown, 2011). Sustainability educator Michael Thomas Needham (2011) referred to ‘sustainable development’ “as the ability to meet the needs of the present while contributing to the future generations’ needs.” There is an additional focus on the present generations’ responsibility to improve the future.
generations’ life by restoring the previous ecosystem damage and resisting contributing to further ecosystem damage. Sustainable development ties together concern for the carrying capacity of natural systems with the social challenges faced by humanity (Hasna, 2007). According to Needham (2011), the concept of sustainable development has in the past most often been broken out into three constituent parts: environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and sociopolitical sustainability. More recently, it has been suggested that a more consistent analytical breakdown is to distinguish four domains of economic, ecological, political and cultural sustainability. This move made ‘culture’ the fourth domain of sustainability.

You may have realised that in Africa, leadership and sustainable development are inseparable. However, the question remains as to what kind of leadership will lead sustainable development in African institutions. Transformational leadership is one such leadership that appears relevant. Transformational leadership is comprised of four components that can help sustainable development in Africa. These are: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass, 1998). These four components can be of immense benefit to the African leader especially in areas to do with sustainable development. For instance, idealized influence occurs when leaders treat followers fairly and earn followers’ trust and respect, thereby serving as a role model in sustainable development. In addition, inspirational motivation encompasses expressing a compelling vision of the future for followers. It also means that for sustainable development a vision for the future is not enough. What is needed is motivating followers to surpass their expectations in sustainable development. The third lesson from transformational leadership for African leaders that benefits sustainable development is intellectual stimulation. This aspect of transformational leadership involves encouraging followers to look at problems in new and different ways, to be creative, and to think independently (Hoption et al. 2013). The other useful lesson is that of individualised consideration. This characteristic of transformational leadership entails leaders being attentive and sensitive to followers’ individual needs and skills. In terms of sustainable development in Africa lessons from the goal of the four facets of transformational leadership is to elevate followers. What this means for sustainable development is that transformational leadership will then be associated with such attributes such as higher organisational performance, employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, employee productivity and employee proactivity (Nemanich and Keller, 2007).

Burns (1978:20) notes that transformational leadership occurs:

‘when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and reality’.

What is good for African institutions tasked with sustainable development is that transformational leadership involves innovation, change, growth, and empowerment of self and others. Characteristic of this form of leadership, community leaders and followers have similar objectives and needs. A mutual sense of security, identity, recognition, development, and self-actualisation shape the contours of negotiation for change in a leadership environment characterized by transformational leadership.

Anambra State Governor Peter Obi (2010) of Nigeria once called for the emergence of transformational leadership in Africa as a panacea to end the many problems confronting the continent. To him, the key to development of nations was transformational and visionary leadership. He challenged participants to ponder on why some countries without any significant natural resources such as Malaysia, Japan and Singapore are developed or developing rapidly while others with abundance of natural resources are still tottering. He said it was about time African countries look upon countries like Singapore that invested heavily on human resources and made a quantum leap from a third to a first world. Governor Obi also said that it was not by accident that China has remained the country that had recorded a significant advancement of lifting over 500 million of its citizens from poverty within a short time. Thus, Obi (2010) called for a paradigm shift on managing African resources for sustainable development of the continent. Against this background, this research sought to characterise leadership for sustainable development in Africa through a case study.

METHODOLOGY

This research was a case study of one university. It was informed by a purposive sample of 30 MBA students from two regions of this university. An open-ended questionnaire was used to gather data.

FINDINGS

Ability to change thinking and practice is the key

According to respondents in this study, leadership with capacity to change thinking and practice was seen as the key. To this end, one respondent opined that:

“In the final analysis, nothing really changes for sustainable development in the African context unless there are changes in the hearts and minds of those in the communities who work with resources.

Even though there is considerable evidence in this study of activity and commitment in the organisations and the networks, it was surprising from the responses that fewer than half of the respondents indicated that there had been changes in the areas that were included in the scale “changes in thinking and practice”. These are the kinds of changes that are essential for knowledge
creation and transformation of practice in African organisations. Although networking organisations has the potential to create the conditions for these changes to occur, their absence suggests that the organisations are not yet engaging in the kind of conceptual change, reflection and challenging of tacit knowledge that will make them knowledge creating institutions.

**Ability to treat followers fairly**

It is in Africa that the history of dictatorship is well documented. Most African leaders are holding back development by failing to treat their followers fairly. Thus, the respondents in this study characterised African leaders who can lead sustainable development as those:

- **Who see equality in their followers and act in manners that promote inclusiveness.**

  Treating followers fairly is a well-documented concept in the literature on leadership and in organisations. For instance, Bass (1998) came with the concept of idealised influence that respects all followers. According to Bass (1998), idealised influence occurs when leaders treat followers fairly and earn followers’ trust and respect, thereby serving as a role model. In terms of this description, there are two components to idealised influence. The first one is an attributional component made on the part of the follower, and the second one is a behavioral component enacted by the leader. These two, if put into practice will help the leader meet the needs of his/her followers.

**Closing the gender gap in leadership**

Respondents in this study were of the opinion that transformational leadership in Africa is characterised by leaders who close the gender gap. The argument from one of the respondents was that:

  Organisational leadership in Africa is in the hands of men and very few women are being nurtured to lead organisations. The gender gap need to be closed.

The issue of closing the gender gap has been alluded to in other African researches. For instance, Wilde (2013) argued that agricultural research leadership in Africa is in the hands of a small group, mostly male and on the verge of retirement, with few experienced professionals equipped to succeed them. He went on to say that in order for agriculture to become an engine for prosperity and wellbeing, it is critical to cultivate a generation of African leaders in food and agriculture, including technically competent, influential women. To Wilde (2013), the number of hungry has grown in Africa by nearly 20 million in the past four years. Thus according to the author, the status quo is not working. The best minds in agricultural research—both men and women—are needed to meet these challenges. In such a case, addressing gender inequalities is the first step towards addressing some of the root causes of poverty, malnutrition, and environmental degradation.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (cited in Wilde, 2013) reports that closing the gender gap in agriculture—giving women farmers the same access to productive resources as men—would mean a 2.5–4% increase in national agricultural output. It would reduce by 12 to 17% the number of undernourished people worldwide. Unfortunately, today women—both on the farm and in the lab—are often prevented from making their full contribution to agriculture and food security (Wilde, 2013). They are held back by deeply entrenched inequities, or gender gaps. What this means is that women have not had a voice in setting the priorities for transformational leadership in African institutions. What may be missing in such a case are effective training programmes that equip and empower African women leaders. It then means that a career development programme that strengthens the research and leadership skills of top women agricultural scientists across the continent is a pre-requisite for sustainable development.

According to African Women in Agricultural Research and Development (AWARD), cited in Wilde (2013), empowered African women are being equipped to bring gender-informed research to the labs and to the farms. Their monitoring data on the first 180 AWARD Fellows who have completed the programme show some remarkable gains. Some of these are:

- 84% of the women experienced a significant increase in their confidence and motivation to excel, lead, and contribute toward a great vision for the future. This empowerment is of crucial importance in the development of African women leaders.
- 87% of the women improved their scientific skills and access to resources. This contributed to a significant increase in their scientific outputs; they more than doubled their annual publication rates in peer-reviewed journals.
- At least 80% of the women are involved in the development of new methodologies or technologies, about half of which are being developed together with smallholder farmers, including women.
- 52% of the women were promoted within their organisation.

This is credible evidence that empowering women has immense benefits to society because in Wilde (2013)’s study, AWARD Fellows are becoming more confident, skilled and influential. They are also becoming more gender-aware and their work more relevant to the needs of the farmer communities they serve. Such practices will transform African institutions.

**Feminine attributes of cooperation and understanding**

The respondents in this study were of the opinion that African leaders for sustainable development need to
disciplinary approaches are increasingly ill equipped to traditional leadership practices entrenched in strictly developing in an era of rapidly changing social and management of social–ecological systems (SES) struggle to fill gaps in knowledge about the behaviour that require a fully integrated approach. Africa is intensifying as universities and research centres have to put it this way: Pluralistic knowing and seeking union were mentioned in this study as critical characteristics of leaders for sustainable development in their organisations. At times men are hilarious, practically minded, direct, better equipped to handle conflict without taking it very personally (though often very poor at handling it once they do take it personally and Martin and Finn (2010) and they are more likely to be vengeful. On the other hand, Witt (2010) and Martin and Finn (2010) are of the opinion that women are nurturing, patient, insightful, think laterally and creatively, good at creating a pleasant and relaxing environment. Witt (2010) further asserts that women are forgiving, tolerant, self contained, spontaneous, instinctive. They are in this respect aware of others’ feelings, considerate, devote to others, emotional, excitable in a major crisis, feelings hurt easily, gentle, kind, neat, tactful, understanding of others and warm in relations with others.

From the discussions in this section, it must be realised that while the defining characteristics of femininity are not universally identical, some patterns such as empathy, sensitivity, caring, compassion, tolerance and nurturance exist and these could be exploited by African organisational leaders aiming for sustainable development and growth in their organisations.

Pluralistic knowing and seeking union

Pluralistic knowing and seeking union were mentioned in this study as critical characteristics of leaders for sustainable development. In that regard, one respondent had to put it this way:

"The leader must be privileged enough to embrace pluralistic knowing and seek union in African organisations."

In the literature, pluralistic knowing is widely documented. For instance, the call for interdisciplinary research to address linked social and environmental issues is not new (Evans cited in Miller et al., 2008). Currently, the drive toward interdisciplinary research is intensifying as universities and research centres struggle to fill gaps in knowledge about the behaviour and management of social–ecological systems (SES) that require a fully integrated approach. Africa is developing in an era of rapidly changing social and ecological relationships. What this means is that traditional leadership practices entrenched in strictly disciplinary approaches are increasingly ill equipped to address a multitude of issues that cut across multiple academic divides. Despite progress in interdisciplinary leadership practices the world over, respondents in this study feared that African leaders might be hampered by a host of problems, including a tendency to privilege a single epistemological and disciplinary perspective in leadership. What must be understood is that different disciplines carry with them different epistemologies or theories of knowledge. The privileging of a single disciplinary or single epistemological perspective limits the potential variety of scientific and local knowledge that can contribute to sustainable development in African organisations. Miller et al. (2008) are of the opinion that epistemological pluralism recognizes that, in any given research context, there may be several valuable ways of knowing, and that accommodating this plurality can lead to more successful integrated leadership practices. This approach is particularly useful in the study and management of social–ecological systems that appear under threat in Africa. Thus, the arguments by the respondents in this study appeared to point out to the fact that interdisciplinary work in organisational leadership in Africa is impeded when divergent epistemologies are not recognized and valued, and that by incorporating a pluralistic framework, these issues can be better explored, resulting in more integrated understanding. According to Miller et al. (2008), the risks associated with inaction at this critical juncture in the development of Africa overwhelmingly outweigh the concerns that arise from the uncertainty of future steps. To this end, it is important to highlight the relevance of accommodating and integrating disparate values, epistemologies, and knowledge towards a more robust understanding of complex issues such as issues of sustainability that bear considerable import a rapidly changing African organisational landscape.

Creating and sustaining relations

The ability of an African organisation to sustain the delivery of quality products and services is essential to its long-term success. This is also true with sustainable development. The respondents in this study believed this. One respondent said:

"It is the ability to create and sustain relations that must be a learnable organisational competence that promotes sustainable development in the African context."

According to Miller (2013) sustaining a caring relationship requires more than having loving feelings. Essential ingredients include mutual respect, a sense of good will, persistence, and motivation. Other important ingredients include affection, humour, honesty, mutual respect and interest, emotional safety, good will, and effective communication. Over and above, in African context, accommodating the particular heterogeneity and diversity of localities and regions are critical characteristics of leaders for sustainable development.
CONCLUSION

This research concludes that community capacity building through grassroots leadership is a necessary and sufficient ingredient for the development and sustenance of African institutions tasked with sustainable development. To do so, transformational leadership must exist at various levels of the organisation in order to mobilise resources and support for sustainable development. Women’s empowerment is a critical variable in this process including the conditions of implementation that create space for levels of leadership to execute a transformational agenda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Based on the conclusions reached in this research, it is recommended that in the dawn of the 21st century, the emerging African leadership for development paradigm reflects a need for leaders who make decisions from a long-term perspective. Such leaders will lead Africa towards economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental sustainability.
- There is need for democratic capacity building in African institutions.
- Leadership for sustainable development in the African context should be characterized by one that invites diverse communities into a participatory process with leadership and not to disenfranchise them through creation of resource-controlling elites. Where inter-ethnic grassroots communities remain disenfranchised, they become the source of new or resurrected conflicts.
- What is needed in Africa is for the 21st century African leader to stimulate the capacity of the community to embrace sustainable development in their organisations and in communities as part of their social responsibility programmes.
- African organisational leaders must first learn the process of leadership for sustainable development and at the same time managing or mitigating conflict to build a community’s capacity for sustainable development.

REFERENCES