

Indigenous Leadership Models in East African Social Enterprises – A New Paradigm for Sustainable Development

Author 1

Wiam Id Boumsoud
York St John University
United Kingdom
wiamidboumsoud@gmail.com

Author 2

Bilal Zaghmout
York St John University
United Kingdom
B.zaghmout@yorks.ac.uk

Author 3

Francis Achi
York St John University
United Kingdom
F.achi@yorks.ac.uk

Author 4

Uma Ema
York St John University
United Kingdom
u.padminiema@yorks.ac.uk

Author 5

Olanrewaju Balogun
Arden University
United Kingdom
iamolabalogun1@gmail.com

Author 6

Yacoob Suleiman
University Campus of Football Business
United Kingdom
y.suleiman@ucfb.ac.uk

Indigenous Leadership Models in East African Social Enterprises – A New Paradigm for Sustainable Development

Abstract

Leadership is crucial for the sustainability of social enterprises, especially in East Africa, where indigenous leadership traditions have long influenced governance. While Western models often dominate management discussions, indigenous leadership—centered on community engagement, ethical governance, and collective decision-making—provides an alternative framework for sustainable development. This study examines the impact of indigenous leadership on decision-making, organizational resilience, and employee engagement in East African social enterprises. Using a mixed-methods approach, it analyzes leadership traits from traditional governance structures, contrasts indigenous and Western models, and proposes a hybrid framework integrating both. The research anticipates that indigenous leadership promotes long-term sustainability through relational governance and ethical practices but may encounter challenges in scalability, investor relations, and formal business integration. This work contributes to leadership and sustainable enterprise development by offering a new paradigm for social enterprises, providing practical recommendations for business leaders, policymakers, and strategists aiming to incorporate indigenous governance principles into modern leadership frameworks.

Keywords: Indigenous leadership, East African social enterprises, sustainable development, governance models, hybrid leadership, community-driven leadership, ethical leadership, organizational resilience

1. Introduction

Social enterprises in East Africa play a crucial role in addressing social and economic challenges, particularly in education, healthcare, agriculture, and microfinance. Unlike traditional businesses, these enterprises balance profit generation with social impact, making leadership effectiveness a critical determinant of long-term sustainability (Muthuri et al., 2019).

Western management models have traditionally influenced Leadership in social enterprises, such as transformational and transactional leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006). However, these models do not always align with East African societies' collectivist and community-centred governance structures. Indigenous leadership, rooted in Ubuntu philosophy, elder councils, and communal decision-making, offers an alternative model that emphasizes trust, ethical leadership, and long-term sustainability (Mbigi, 2005).

Despite the importance of indigenous leadership, limited research explores how these leadership frameworks impact modern social enterprises. This study seeks to bridge this gap by investigating Indigenous leadership principles, assessing their impact on social enterprises, and developing a hybrid leadership model that integrates Indigenous and contemporary leadership approaches.

This research explores how indigenous leadership models within East African social enterprises contribute to sustainable development by analyzing decision-making processes, leadership traits, and organizational resilience. For this, the following research question should be answered:

1. How do indigenous leadership models influence decision-making in East African social enterprises?
2. What key leadership traits from Indigenous governance contribute to sustainable development?
3. How do indigenous and Western leadership models compare in social enterprises?
4. What hybrid leadership approaches can be developed to enhance the effectiveness of East African social enterprises?

As social enterprises evolve in East Africa, understanding leadership's role in sustainability is essential. This study bridges indigenous and Western leadership models, providing empirical evidence on the effectiveness of indigenous governance in social enterprises. It offers a new leadership framework integrating traditional and modern practices. The findings will benefit business leaders, policymakers, and development practitioners aiming to enhance leadership effectiveness and promote sustainable growth in East African social enterprises.

2. Literature Review

Leadership is critical in shaping organizational sustainability, particularly in social enterprises that operate at the intersection of business and social impact. While Western leadership models have dominated management literature, Indigenous leadership frameworks in East Africa remain underexplored despite their deep-rooted influence on governance, decision-making, and community-driven sustainability (Mkutu, 2020). Social enterprises in East Africa, which blend profit-making with social and environmental goals, are increasingly turning to indigenous leadership principles as an alternative approach to Western managerial ideologies (Mwangi & Ngugi, 2018).

This literature review examines indigenous leadership models, their impact on sustainability, and their intersection with Western leadership paradigms in East African social enterprises. The discussion identifies core leadership traits derived from traditional governance structures, evaluates their role in organizational resilience and employee engagement, and explores potential hybrid leadership models that integrate indigenous and contemporary leadership principles.

2.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Indigenous Leadership and Social Enterprises

Indigenous leadership models in East Africa are deeply rooted in traditional governance systems that emphasize collectivism, consensus-building, and moral leadership (Mawere & van Stam, 2016). Unlike Western models prioritizing individualism and hierarchical authority, indigenous leadership is community-oriented, focusing on collective well-being (Mosha, 2018), and relies on participatory decisionmaking (Mutunga & Sharif, 2017). It is also rooted in ancestral wisdom and spirituality, incorporating ethical leadership based on philosophies like Ubuntu (Mbigi, 2005). However, existing leadership literature is heavily skewed towards Western theories, with limited empirical research on the role of indigenous leadership in modern organizational settings. Recent scholarship has begun to redress this imbalance by foregrounding indigenous African epistemologies. Eyong (2016) contrasts African leadership's relational, communal ethics with Anglo-centric individualism, while Aliye (2020) shows how Gada and Ubuntu together constitute a participatory democratic ethic that privileges consensus and moral authority. More recently, Lerutla and Steyn (2025) provide empirical evidence from South African enterprises, demonstrating that context-specific indigenous values predict leader effectiveness more reliably than imported Western constructs. Engaging with these perspectives underscores this study's aim to situate East-African social-enterprise leadership within a distinctly African intellectual tradition.

Social enterprises in East Africa operate across sectors like microfinance, agriculture, healthcare, and education, aiming to serve economically marginalized populations (Muthuri et al., 2019). Leadership in these enterprises must balance financial viability with social missions (Doherty et al., 2014), engage stakeholders in both rural and urban areas, and integrate traditional governance values with modern business strategies. Studies highlight a growing trend of hybrid leadership approaches, where social enterprises blend indigenous leadership traits with Western management

practices (Ngugi, 2021). However, limited research examines how indigenous leadership principles directly impact the long-term sustainability and performance of social enterprises in East Africa.

2.2 Indigenous Leadership Traits and Their Influence on Social Enterprise Sustainability

Indigenous leadership in East Africa is historically tied to traditional governance structures, such as elders' councils, where leaders are chosen based on wisdom, experience, and community trust, ensuring continuity and stability (Mkutu, 2020). Some ethnic communities practice rotational leadership to prevent dictatorship and ensure inclusive governance (Gathogo, 2019). Additionally, oral decision-making processes rely on consensus-based dialogues, prioritizing conflict resolution and harmony (Mosha, 2018). Research suggests these indigenous leadership traits contribute to organizational stability and ethical decision-making in social enterprises (Mutunga & Sharif, 2017). However, limited empirical research links these traits to measurable organizational performance indicators such as employee engagement, financial sustainability, and innovation capacity.

2.3 Indigenous Leadership vs. Western Leadership Models in Social Enterprises

Many social enterprises in East Africa adopt Western leadership frameworks, such as transformational leadership, which focuses on vision and inspiration (Bass & Riggio, 2006); servant leadership, emphasizing leaders serving followers (Greenleaf, 1977); and transactional leadership, based on rewards for performance (Burns, 1978). However, these models often overlook the collectivist and community-centered values inherent in African organizations (Nkomo, 2011). Existing leadership literature is heavily skewed towards Western theories, with limited empirical research on indigenous leadership's role in modern organizational settings.

Studies indicate that indigenous leadership in East Africa aligns closely with servant and transformational leadership models due to its emphasis on holistic leadership that integrates social responsibility and economic stability (Muthuri et al., 2019), as well as relational leadership that prioritizes long-term relationships over short-term profitability (Mosha, 2018). However, Western models provide structured strategic planning and performance measurement tools that indigenous leadership often lacks (Doherty et al., 2014). Currently, there is no established framework comparing the effectiveness of indigenous and Western leadership models in East African social enterprises.

2.4 Towards a Hybrid Leadership Model for Sustainable Development

Research suggests that a hybrid leadership model, blending indigenous and modern principles, can enhance the sustainability of social enterprises in East Africa by balancing long-term community goals with short-term business performance (Ngugi, 2021). This approach improves employee engagement through cultural alignment and participatory governance (Mawere & van Stam, 2016), while strengthening crisis

resilience by integrating adaptive strategies from both leadership traditions (Mutunga & Sharif, 2017).

This study seeks to develop a new leadership paradigm that integrates:

1. Consensus-driven decision-making from indigenous leadership.
2. Strategic vision and innovation from contemporary leadership.
3. Community engagement and ethical governance as a hybrid approach.

There is no widely accepted framework guiding social enterprises on how to integrate indigenous and Western leadership approaches for long-term sustainability.

Despite the growing recognition of indigenous leadership principles, several critical research gaps persist. First, there is limited empirical data on indigenous leadership within social enterprises, as most studies focus on corporate and political governance rather than entrepreneurial leadership, necessitating more research to quantify its impact on social enterprise performance. Second, there is a lack of comparative leadership models, with few studies directly comparing indigenous and Western frameworks in East African social enterprises. Third, challenges exist in integrating hybrid leadership models, as no structured approach guides the merging of indigenous wisdom with modern management principles. Finally, context-specific leadership strategies are needed, requiring models tailored to the diverse cultural and economic settings of East African social enterprises. Addressing these gaps could foster a leadership paradigm that promotes sustainable development through culturally inclusive governance.

This literature review underscores the pivotal role of indigenous leadership models in fostering sustainable social enterprises in East Africa. While Western leadership theories offer valuable management tools, indigenous leadership provides culturally relevant governance structures that prioritize community well-being, ethical decisionmaking, and long-term sustainability. To advance this field, future research should develop empirical studies assessing the direct impact of indigenous leadership traits on SME performance, create comparative frameworks evaluating the effectiveness of indigenous and Western leadership models, and establish hybrid models that integrate the strengths of both traditions. Addressing these gaps will contribute to a new leadership paradigm that promotes sustainable development through culturally inclusive governance.

2.5 Lean–Ubuntu Framework

Mangaroo-Pillay (2025) synthesises Lean-management principles with Ubuntu philosophy, proposing a “Lean–Ubuntu” framework that marries process efficiency with communal ethics. The present study adopts this model as a comparative lens: Lean’s emphasis on waste reduction parallels the resource-constrained realities of East-African social enterprises, while Ubuntu’s relational ethic aligns with indigenous

leadership's community orientation. By analysing where Lean–Ubuntu converges with, or diverges from, the hybrid model proposed here, the paper clarifies its theoretical contribution: extending Lean–Ubuntu beyond production settings into the governance of social-impact organisations.

3.Methodology

This research explores how indigenous leadership models in East African social enterprises support sustainable development through decision-making, employee engagement, and leadership adaptability. Given the complexity of indigenous leadership, a mixed-methods approach ensures academic rigor, validity, and contextual depth. The study adopts a pragmatist research philosophy, integrating positivist and interpretivist paradigms to balance objective measurement with cultural narratives (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). A pragmatist stance legitimises the combination of positivist survey methods and interpretivist interviews by prioritising the research question over philosophical purity (Saunders et al., 2019). In other words, quantifiable patterns of leadership effectiveness are best revealed through surveys, whereas the culturally embedded meanings of leadership practice require qualitative exploration; integrating both therefore offers a more complete, practice-relevant picture than either paradigm alone.

A mixed-methods approach combines deductive reasoning to test existing leadership theories (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2022) with inductive reasoning to uncover emerging themes on leadership adaptability and cultural integration. The study employs a multimethod strategy, incorporating surveys to evaluate leadership effectiveness, semistructured interviews with leaders and stakeholders, and case study analysis of social enterprises applying indigenous leadership models. This comprehensive approach enhances reliability and ensures a deeper understanding of indigenous leadership's role in social enterprise sustainability

3.1 Data Collection

This study utilizes both primary and secondary data to examine the impact of indigenous leadership in East African social enterprises. Primary data collection includes structured surveys using a 5-point Likert scale to assess leadership effectiveness, sustainability impact, and cultural adaptability. Semi-structured interviews with 20–30 social enterprise leaders, employees, and community representatives provide qualitative insights, while case studies analyze leadership practices from successful social enterprises.

Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed studies on indigenous leadership, social entrepreneurship, and sustainability, alongside industry reports from governmental and non-governmental organizations on SME performance in East Africa. Archival data, such as previous case studies and organizational performance reports, further contextualize findings.

A purposive sampling technique ensures data relevance and validity. For quantitative research, stratified random sampling targets approximately 250–300 SME leaders, employees, and stakeholders across Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda. Qualitative research employs snowball sampling, engaging 20–30 social enterprise founders, managers, employees, and indigenous community leaders. This approach enhances cultural depth and empirical robustness in the findings.

3.2 Data Analysis

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative analyses to evaluate indigenous leadership's impact on East African social enterprises. Quantitative methods include descriptive statistics to assess leadership effectiveness and sustainability, and inferential statistics, such as regression analysis and correlation tests, to explore relationships between leadership models and organizational resilience. SPSS software ensures precise data analysis. Qualitative analysis involves transcribing and coding interviews to identify themes related to leadership adaptation and cultural influences, utilizing NVivo software for systematic pattern recognition. This integrated approach combines statistical validation with narrative insights, offering a comprehensive understanding of indigenous leadership's role in promoting sustainability.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical guidelines set by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Participants will provide informed consent after receiving study details, with assurances of confidentiality through data anonymization. Participation is voluntary, allowing withdrawal at any stage without consequence. Data protection measures comply with GDPR and institutional research ethics standards. To mitigate researcher bias, reflexivity journals will be maintained. These measures ensure research integrity and participant protection.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

This study acknowledges limitations, including self-reporting bias, where participants may misjudge leadership effectiveness, and a cross-sectional design that limits longitudinal insights. Findings may not be generalizable to all African social enterprises, and a larger sample could enhance statistical power. Future research should explore longitudinal studies and cross-country comparisons for greater validation. Despite these constraints, the study employs a robust methodological framework, integrating quantitative surveys, qualitative interviews, and case studies. This mixed-methods approach enhances reliability and contextual richness, contributing to a deeper understanding of leadership adaptation in sustainable development.

4. Expected Findings and Discussion

This section presents the expected findings of the study on indigenous leadership models in East African social enterprises and their role in sustainable development. The discussion integrates qualitative and quantitative perspectives, drawing from empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, and comparative leadership models. The study anticipates identifying unique leadership traits derived from indigenous governance, assessing their impact on social enterprise resilience, and comparing them with Western leadership models.

The study expects to demonstrate that indigenous leadership principles significantly influence organizational sustainability, community engagement, and ethical decisionmaking. The findings are likely to align with existing research while providing new insights into culturally embedded leadership strategies that enhance social enterprise performance in East Africa.

4.1 Role of Indigenous Leadership in Governance and Decision-Making

This research anticipates that indigenous leadership practices enhance participatory decision-making and ethical governance in social enterprises. Consensus-driven leadership is expected to improve stakeholder engagement and minimize conflicts, leading to increased community participation in decision-making. Traditional leadership structures, such as elders' councils, likely influence modern governance models by prioritizing collective well-being over individual gain. Additionally, indigenous leadership is anticipated to foster resilience by utilizing oral traditions, storytelling, and ancestral knowledge to navigate challenges. These expectations align with prior research indicating that indigenous governance emphasizes sustainability through intergenerational leadership and long-term decision-making.

4.2 Key Indigenous Leadership Traits in Social Enterprises

Expected findings indicate that indigenous leadership traits contribute to sustainable development in East African social enterprises. Ubuntu leadership, based on interconnectedness, fosters collaboration and ethical governance (Mbigi, 2005). Relational leadership prioritizes mentorship and holistic approaches over hierarchical models (Mutunga & Sharif, 2017). Community-embedded leadership ensures that social enterprises emphasize social and environmental responsibility over profit (Muthuri et al., 2019). These traits are expected to enhance social enterprise success, employee commitment, and stakeholder trust. However, few studies have quantified their impact on financial performance, employee engagement, and social outcomes. The research anticipates revealing distinct differences and synergies between indigenous and Western leadership models in social enterprises.

4.3 Comparing Indigenous Leadership and Western Leadership in Social Enterprises

The research anticipates uncovering distinct differences and synergies between Indigenous and Western leadership approaches:

Aspect	Indigenous Leadership	Western Leadership
Decision-Making	Consensus-based, community-driven	Individualistic, executive-driven
Ethical Foundations	Ubuntu values, ancestral wisdom	Code of conduct, legal frameworks
Sustainability Approach	Long-term, intergenerational	Short-term, profit-driven
Organizational Hierarchy	Flat, relational structures	Hierarchical, formal authority
Employee Engagement	High trust, mentorship-oriented	Performance-driven, goal-setting

The study anticipates that while Western leadership models offer structured strategic planning and performance metrics, they often lack cultural alignment with local business traditions. Conversely, Indigenous leadership fosters deep-rooted trust and community engagement but may face challenges in scalability and global competitiveness. Currently, there is no established framework comparing the hybridization of Indigenous and Western leadership models in social enterprises.

4.4 Challenges in Implementing Indigenous Leadership in Modern Social Enterprises

Despite the advantages of indigenous leadership, several barriers hinder its implementation in contemporary social enterprises. Modern organizational structures often conflict with traditional governance practices, making integration challenging. Additionally, the lack of leadership development programs tailored to indigenous principles limits their adaptation to formal business environments. Funding and investor preferences for Western models may undervalue indigenous leadership in enterprise development. These challenges highlight the tension between traditional leadership wisdom and modern business demands. Limited research exists on balancing formal management structures with the benefits of indigenous leadership traditions.

4.5 Towards a Hybrid Leadership Model for Social Enterprises

The study anticipates proposing a hybrid leadership model that integrates consensus-driven decision-making from indigenous leadership to enhance community engagement, strategic vision and performance metrics from contemporary leadership for scalability, and ethical governance rooted in Ubuntu philosophy to reinforce sustainability. This research aims to develop a leadership framework for East African social enterprises by aligning culturally rooted leadership principles with modern management tools and creating training programs that merge traditional wisdom with contemporary leadership education. This hybrid model could serve as a blueprint for leadership development in emerging economies. However, no comprehensive

framework currently integrates indigenous leadership with Western methodologies for social enterprises.

5. Conclusion

This study identifies critical research gaps, including the need for empirical data on indigenous leadership's effectiveness, comparative analyses with Western models, and frameworks for implementing hybrid leadership in social enterprises. Expected findings suggest that indigenous leadership enhances participatory decision-making, ethical governance, and resilience in East African social enterprises. However, challenges such as structural and financial constraints may hinder its integration into modern business environments. Proposing a hybrid leadership model aims to bridge traditional and contemporary practices. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies, standardized metrics for leadership effectiveness, and training programs that blend indigenous knowledge with modern business strategies. This study contributes to leadership theory and practice by offering comparative insights and policy recommendations for East African enterprises, aligning cultural values with sustainable development.

References

- Aliye, A.A. (2020). *African indigenous leadership philosophy and democratic governance system: Gada's intersectionality with Ubuntu*. *Journal of Black Studies*, 51(7), pp. 727–759.
- Bass, B.M. and Riggio, R.E. (2006) *Transformational Leadership*. 2nd edn. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Doherty, B., Haugh, H. and Lyon, F. (2014) 'Social Enterprises as Hybrid Organizations: A Review and Research Agenda', *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 16(4), pp. 417–436. doi: 10.1111/ijmr.12028.
- Eyong, J.E. (2016). *Indigenous African Leadership: Key differences from Anglo-centric thinking and writings*. *Leadership*, 13(2), pp. 133–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715016663050>
- Field, A. (2018) *Discovering Statistics Using IBM SPSS Statistics*. 5th edn. London: SAGE Publications.
- Gathogo, J. (2019) 'African Philosophy as Expressed in the Concepts of Hospitality and Ubuntu', *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 134, pp. 39–53.
- Kabasheva, N.P., Karpunina, E.V. and Sokolova, M.V. (2017) 'Problems of Adaptation of Traditional Management Models in Modern Organizations', *European Research Studies Journal*, 20(2A), pp. 3–12.
- Lerutla, M. and Steyn, R. (2025). *African Business Leadership and Effectiveness: Perspectives from South African Leaders*. *Administrative Sciences*, 15(3), 83. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci15030083>
- Mangaroo-Pillay, M. (2025). *The Lean–Ubuntu leadership framework*. *International Journal of Lean Six Sigma*. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLSS-02-2024-0032>
- Mawere, M. and van Stam, G. (2016) 'Ubuntu/Unhu as Communal Love: Critical Reflections on the Sociology of Ubuntu and Communal Life in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict Transformation*, 5(1), pp. 91–131.
- Mbigi, L. (2005) *The Spirit of African Leadership*. Randburg: Knowledge Resources.
- Mkutu, K.A. (2020) 'Indigenous Institutions and Good Governance in Africa: The Case of Pastoralist Communities in Kenya', *Nomadic Peoples*, 24(1), pp. 3–28. doi: 10.3197/np.2020.240102.
- Mosha, R.S. (2018) *The Heartbeat of Indigenous Africa: A Study of the Chagga Educational System*. New York: Routledge.

- Muthuri, J.N., Moon, J. and Idemudia, U. (2019) 'Corporate Innovation and Sustainable Community Development in Developing Countries', *Business & Society*, 58(3), pp. 474–522. doi: 10.1177/0007650316675614.
- Mutunga, S.L. and Sharif, Z. (2017) 'Leadership in Africa: Meanings, Impacts, and Identities', *African Journal of Economic and Management Studies*, 8(3), pp. 258–274. doi: 10.1108/AJEMS-03-2017-0040.
- Mwangi, I.W. and Ngugi, K. (2018) 'Determinants of Growth of Social Enterprises in Kenya: A Survey of Registered Social Benefit Organizations in Nairobi', *International Journal of Social Sciences and Information Technology*, 4(10), pp. 693–709.
- Saunders, M., Lewis, P. and Thornhill, A. (2019) *Research Methods for Business Students*. 8th edn. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Sidani, Y. and Al Ariss, A. (2014) 'Institutional and Corporate Drivers of Global Talent Management: Evidence from the Arab Gulf Region', *Journal of World Business*, 49(2), pp. 215–224. doi: 10.1016/j.jwb.2013.11.005.
- Wanjira Mathai (2024) *Time*. Available at: <https://time.com/7172523/wanjira-mathai-2/> (Accessed: 27 February 2025).