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Value of global non-profit organisations in solving the 21st-century challenges and leadership development in Africa

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This study analysed tenets and general characteristics of international service-based non-profit organisations (NPOs) that play a part in addressing 21st-century challenges and leadership development (LD) in Africa. The aim of the study was to analyse the attributes of the NPOs and to investigate their contribution to addressing challenges faced in Africa. The study also aimed to analyse the contribution of the NPOs to LD on the continent. The study focused on NPOs that had a presence in Africa. Data were collected from 13 international service-based NPOs that were randomly selected from the Union of International Associations. Results revealed that NPOs had tenets that focused on making a positive impact on communities. A total of 15 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were addressed by the NPOs that were studied. The NPOs also had LD in their activities. Experiential learning and mentorship were integral components of the NPOs. Experiential learning and mentorship, which characterised LD in these organisations, were observed to be aligned with the leadership needs of the 21st century. This research concluded that international service-based NPOs contributed to solving global problems in Africa through addressing SDGs, as well as presented LD that was relevant to the 21st century, such as the development of citizen and moral leadership skills. This research recommends comprehensive analyses of the efficacy and power dynamics of NPOs, in order to contribute to the body of knowledge of these organisations in Africa.

Transdisciplinary Contribution: The research sought to close the gap on the paucity of knowledge on the transdisciplinary contribution of international service-based NPOs in addressing contemporary global issues across several disciplines. Through their activities, international service-based NPOs had transdisciplinary contributions in solving global issues in environmental, socio-political, socio-economic, sustainable development and LD disciplines.

Keywords: Africa; 21st century; global challenges; international service-based non-profit organisations; leadership development.

Introduction

The world today needs effective leaders who are capable of leading in a complex environment.[1] This need emanates from the many challenges facing the modern world. Political instability, diseases, climate change, global recessions and rapid technological advancements are some of the 21st-century global challenges[2] that call for effective leaders who are purpose-driven. These challenges are imposing tremendous pressure on leadership the world over, to adapt and align to the highly unpredictable landscape or risk submerging. The importance of strengthening human capital and especially strengthening leadership in the 21st century cannot be overemphasised, particularly in Africa, considering the numerous problems facing the continent. The myriad social, economic, political and environmental challenges faced by humanity today, coupled with the rapid technological advancement that is currently sweeping through the globe, are key factors that are affecting the performance of sectors and societies in many parts of the world, including Africa.[1]

Twenty-first-century global challenges

Many of the challenges facing humanity today are fundamentally global in nature[2] and are associated with devastating effects at local scales. Examining the geopolitical landscape of the 21st century reveals that today's world is characterised by political tensions, which are threatening global peace.[3] Several political conflicts have been experienced in the 21st century, and they

include the war in Ukraine and the Israel–Palestine conflict. Escalation of the great-power competition between superpowers of the world has also marked the 21st century, with a rising threat to global peace.[3] Diseases such as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), Ebola and M-pox are also some of the calamities experienced in the 21st century that have demanded effective leadership to overcome the devastating effects.

Climate change is another global challenge which is influencing performance in many sectors. Climate change has devastating effects on the ecological, environmental, socio-political and socio-economic disciplines.[4] Effects of climate change include massive extinctions of biodiversity, disruption of human livelihoods, poor food security, frequent occurrence of catastrophes such as floods and droughts, damage to infrastructure, increase in disease and pest incidences, disruptions in hydroelectric power generation and supply, and reduction in agricultural and industrial productivity.[4] Research on the economics of climate change highlights that climate change is associated with irreversible alterations to ecosystems, and these alterations have been projected to increase substantially in the future.[5] Ecosystems are public goods that support human communities, industry and commerce; thus, implications associated with their destruction are socially, economically and politically excruciating.

Another global challenge that is demanding effective leadership in the 21st century is the rapid technological advancement, which is sweeping across the world. Today's leaders are experiencing a transitional wave of technological advancement, which is exerting pressure on organisations to embrace the new epoch and to lead positive change at all levels. The world is going through a new industrial revolution, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, which is characterised by rapid technological advancement.[6] The Fourth Industrial Revolution, also known as the Industry 4.0 era or the digital era, is characterised by the most revolutionary technological advancement ever experienced in the history of mankind.[7] The environment is best described as volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous and is abbreviated as the volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.[8] A successful organisation in the VUCA context is one that has agile teams that are strongly interconnected.[9]

Development of effective citizen leadership is another important societal challenge, which requires attention in the 21st century, as communities increasingly realise the need for active participation of citizens in solving problems facing their communities. The ever-growing pressure emanating from the VUCA environment has sparked the realisation of the need for collective solutions to improve the quality of life for people in communities. The pragmatic definition of citizen leadership is the active involvement of people in issues that influence their communities and quality of life.[10] The concept of citizen leadership entails people having control over their own services and taking active action in community issues. A distinct attribute of citizen leadership is its inclusion of cross-cultural savviness, where citizen leaders should have the ability to interact with people from a wide range of backgrounds and experiences to bring about positive change to communities.[11] Citizen leadership plays a central role in the resolution of collective action.[12]

Societal and organisational challenges related to gender, generational diversity and culture are additional factors that are of top priority in today's global issues and which call for effective leadership to address them. Consideration of gender, generational diversity and cultural issues is significant when building an effective and sustainable leadership strategy in the current era.[13] Leadership that considers these issues has a positive competitive edge in today's world as the issues are in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Besides gender, generational diversity and culture, embracing all the 17 SDGs listed in the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations in organisational thrusts contributes to effective leadership in today's society.

Leadership development in the 21st century

Looking at the challenges affecting continents in the 21st century, leadership can be concluded to be a fundamental phenomenon in societies. This is because at the macro level, leadership wields influence across all sectors and has a great impact on the social, economic and political domains.[14] Basing on the global problems experienced in the 21st century, the importance of effective leadership development (LD) thus comes under the spotlight. Leadership development is the process of imparting leadership skills to individuals in order to enhance their ability to execute leadership roles.[15] The LD concept has an orientation towards the development of social capital.[16] At its core, effective leadership is a unique combination of personal and interpersonal skills with great potential to drive organisations towards meeting their goals and at the same time empowering team members in loyalty, unity and excelling towards a common goal.[17] However, despite the importance of effective leadership in organisational performance, research has revealed that many organisations across the world lack this indispensable leadership capacity.[13] This observation is an indication of a pertinent issue that requires attention, particularly in today's VUCA environment.

Academic systems play a critical role in LD.[18] The LD is a process that involves some structured initiatives, designed to impart and sharpen leadership skills in individuals, through the use of diverse educational processes that include the formal learning system, sequencers and coaching.[19] Academic systems offer LD programmes in a structured manner. The profile of a typical accredited professional leadership graduate programme in the United States, for example, is offered in a structured manner that

combines theory and practice.[20] It is, however, important to observe that, besides academic institutions, LD is also a key component of some non-academic institutions. Non-profit organisations (NPOs), for example, service-based NPOs, operate using structured processes and procedures, which present opportunities for LD to people. Non-profit organisations are defined as organisations whose sole purpose is not driven by the need to make a profit.[21,22] Activities of NPOs are broad and may include vital social and human services that complement the services offered by the public sector and/or fill gaps that are not covered by the public sector in communities. Typically, service-based NPOs provide services to communities on a non-profit basis, often through some hands-on approaches that are designed to address needs in society.[23,24] They also often engage in capacity building to nurture sustainable and long-term impacts for the betterment of society.[23,24] Organisations such as the Rotary and Leo Clubs, Junior Chambers International and Toastmasters International fall under the broad category of service-based NPOs. One of the unique attributes of service-based NPOs is the LD that is embodied in their systems and activities. The process is entrenched in experience and personal development.[25] This LD approach is a component of service-based NPOs. The activities of these organisations also contribute to solving challenges faced by societies. There is, however, an empirical knowledge gap on the role played by service-based NPOs in LD and in solving the numerous challenges faced by different sectors in the 21st century, particularly in Africa.

Conceptual framework

The leadership phenomenon has been a subject of research for many years.[26] From the many research findings, the leadership concept may be regarded as a complex phenomenon, which has continuously evolved with changes in society.[27] The New Leadership Theory dominates the contemporary leadership philosophy. Under this theory, leadership is viewed as a complex phenomenon, which is determined by many factors, especially in a fast-changing world.[28] The theory recognises the importance of traits and context in leadership and asserts that the world is changing very fast and effective leadership requires adaptive leaders who are capable of embracing the rapid change, particularly in new technologies.[28] The theory embraces the transformational leadership style, where the leader's ability to motivate and encourage team members to be more adaptive to new approaches in the execution of tasks in line with the prevailing conditions is considered a critical determinant of effective leadership, particularly in fast-changing environments.[28] In addition, experiential learning also forms an integral part of LD under the theory, as the learning approach is grounded in context, experience, abstract conceptualisation and active participation, which are all important factors in the development of effective leadership skills for the 21st century. Within the VUCA environment, the imperative need for effective leadership cannot be overemphasised.

The diverse challenges faced by Africa call for leaders of high quality at all levels within the continent.[29,30] Developing effective leadership in Africa has the potential to enhance the continent's creativity and innovation in handling and seeking solutions for its adversities that emanate from poverty, climate change, diseases and low economic development, which all affect the continent's capacity to achieve the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Developing effective leadership in Africa also has the potential to enhance the continent's footing and competitive edge in the VUCA environment. Some global research has shown that effective leadership is key in driving organisations to achieve positive performance in periods of volatility.[7,13] However, despite the importance of effective leadership in organisational performance, research has revealed that many organisations and sectors across the world lack this indispensable leadership capacity.[13] This observation is an indication of a pertinent issue that requires attention, particularly in Africa, where LD is hampered by poverty, political instability and other socio-economic problems that ravage the continent.

Africa faces many challenges that compromise the delivery of LD in the formal education system. The education system in Africa is crippled by a surfeit of challenges, with resource mobilisation being among the core challenges.[31] Congruent with these observations, this study explored the transdisciplinary contributions of international service-based NPOs to solving LD in Africa in line with the New Leadership Theory and the experiential learning approach, as well as in addressing the challenges faced by the continent in the 21st century. The research sought to generate empirical evidence that would close the knowledge gap on the transdisciplinary contribution of international service-based NPOs in addressing these issues in Africa. Figure 1 is a conceptual framework diagram showing the hypothesised link between global challenges, LD and the potential contribution of service-based NPOs in solving Africa's problems and in influencing the continent's performance.

Study's aim

This study aimed to investigate the transdisciplinary contribution of international service-based NPOs to addressing challenges faced by Africa in the 21st century, as well as to assess the organisations' contribution to LD on the continent. This study focused on three objectives, namely: (1) to investigate the tenets and general characteristics of international service-based NPOs with operations in Africa; (2) to investigate the global challenges addressed by the NPOs in Africa in the 21st century; and (3) to assess the presence and characteristics of LD in the organisations. The study sought to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the tenets and general characteristics of international service-based NPOs with operations in Africa? (2) Are there any 21st-century global challenges addressed by these organisations in Africa? (3) Do the organisations offer any LD and if so, what are the characteristics of the LD offered?

Research methods and design

Study design

This study was carried out in Africa. It analysed the tenets and general characteristics of international service-based NPOs operating in Africa. An analysis of the tenets and characteristics of service-based NPOs was carried out on 13 organisations that were randomly selected from a pool of international service-based NPOs that operated in Africa. In this research, international service-based NPOs were defined as registered service-based NPOs that had an international thrust and operated in more than one continent. Information on the organisations was obtained from the Union of International Associations (UIA)[32] web source as presented after searching for 'international service-based organisations' using the Google search engine.

Qualitative research requires few samples to reach saturation.[33] Saturation in qualitative research refers to the point where the collection of more data does not add any additional insight to empirical tests, but leads to redundancy. There is no fixed rule for a sample size for qualitative research.[34] Some researchers suggest that a sample size of between 12 and 15 can achieve saturation.[35] Data collection on service-based NPOs for this study was therefore carried out on 13 organisations that were randomly selected from a pool of international service-based NPOs operating in Africa. Random numbers were used to select the 13 organisations from the pool listed on the UIA platform. With a sample size of 13, saturation would likely be achieved in this research, and any excess of this would not likely yield significant differences to the established result.

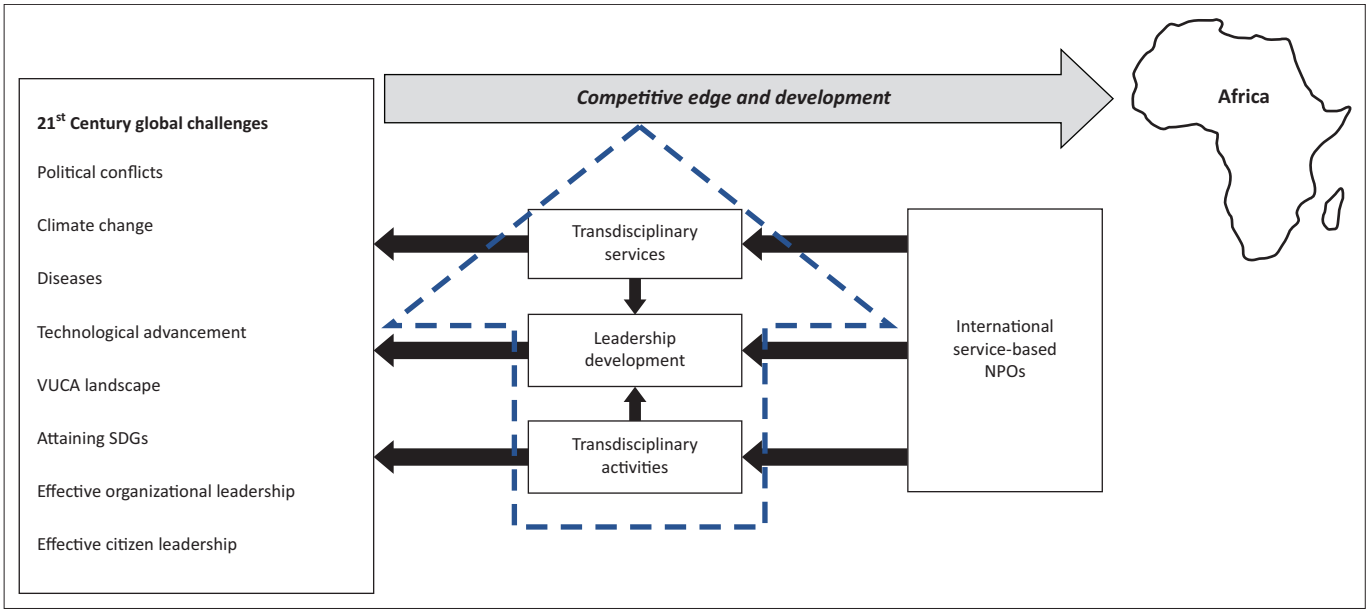
Examination of the tenets and characteristics of the selected organisations, as well as the challenges they addressed in societies, involved assessing various sources, which included published and unpublished literature, websites and respective organisations' materials such as periodicals and pamphlets. All datasets compiled were based on information availed by the respective organisations on public platforms. This data collection approach was used based on the justification that the research adopted a real-life scenario in the acquisition of information. In a real-life scenario, information availed on public platforms is the major source of information that is normally accessed and used by potential subjects to make decisions. Characteristics assessed included membership conditions, subscriptions, organisational structure, organisational thrust, and LD approaches. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data and depict the findings.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Only international service-based NPOs listed on the UIA platform with operations in more than one continent, including Africa, were included for sampling in this research. Service-based NPOs with operations only in Africa or in only one continent were excluded from sampling. The study only focused on international service-based NPOs operating in Africa in order to explore their value and their relevance to the continent from a global perspective. Service-based NPOs of African origin were not included in this research because they lacked the international integration, which was one of the key aspects to be investigated in this research.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Zambia Biomedical Research Ethics Committee (No. 5602-2024).



NPO, non-profit organisation; VUCA, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous; SDG, sustainable development goal.

FIGURE 1: Conceptual framework diagram showing the hypothesised link between global challenges, leadership development and the potential contribution of service-based non-profit organisations in solving Africa's problems and in influencing the continent's performance.

Results

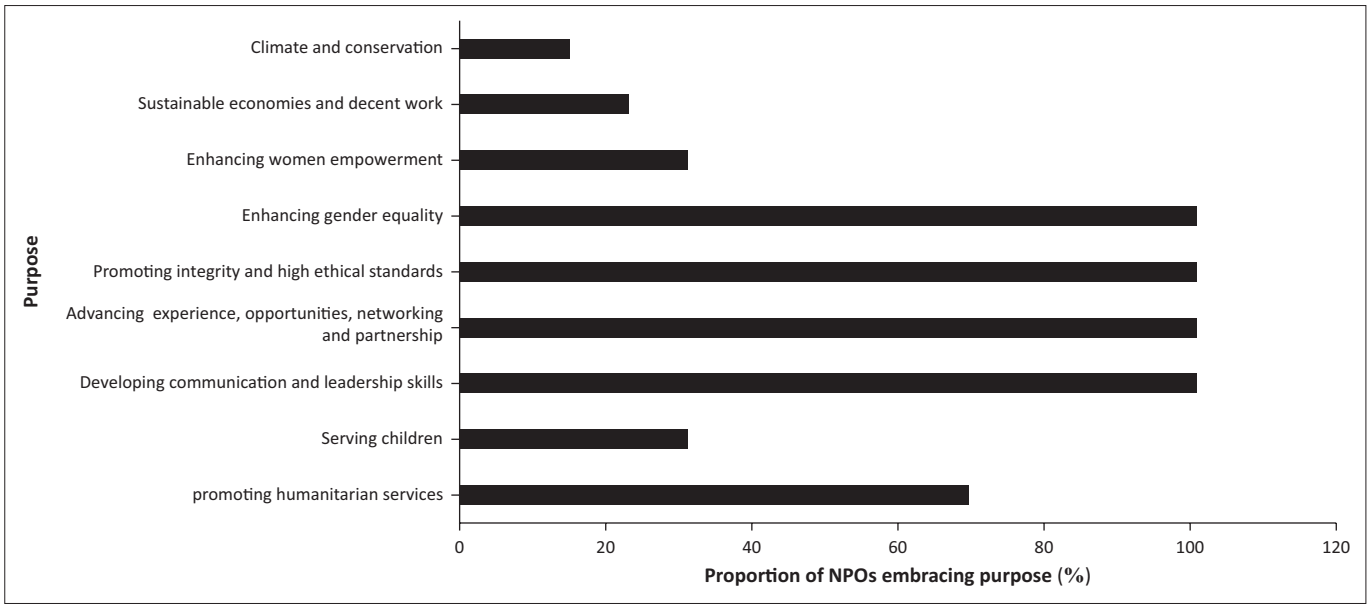
All NPOs analysed in this study had an international thrust with operations in more than one continent. The number of countries in which the NPOs were operating on a global scale varied widely, ranging from less than 20 countries to 207 countries. The observed mean and standard deviation of the number of countries in which the NPOs were operating were 88 ± 57.6. In all, 8% of the NPOs were operating in more than 200 countries, 31% were operating in 100–150 countries, 8% in 80–89 countries, 15% in 60–69 countries, 8% in 40–49 countries, another 8% in 30–39 countries, 7% in 20–29 countries and 15% in less than 20 countries. Presence in African countries also varied greatly among the NPOs, ranging from 1 to 47, with a mean and standard deviation of 18 ± 15.2 countries.

Results revealed that all NPOs analysed in this study had a purpose, mission and goals. Heterogeneity was observed in the purposes. Purposes observed embraced nine broad categories of services to address problems in Africa namely: (1) promotion of humanitarian services, (2) serving children, (3) developing communication and leadership skills, (4) advancing experience, opportunities, networking and partnership, (5) promoting integrity, high ethical standards, peace and goodwill, (6) enhancing gender equality, (7) enhancing women empowerment, (8) advancing sustainable economies and decent work, and (9) advancing climate change and conservation issues (Figure 2). Results revealed that although heterogeneity was observed on the purposes of the NPOs, an organisation could identify with one or more of the categories. Results also revealed that although the purposes varied, all organisations assessed in this study had missions and goals crafted around one theme, which was to make a positive impact on communities through their services and activities.

All organisations assessed in this study directly embraced LD, advancing experience, opportunities, networking, partnerships, gender equality, integrity and high ethical standards in their tenets and purposes (Figure 2). A proportion of 69% had purposes that were directly linked to humanitarian services, while 31% had purposes directly linked to serving children, and another 31% had purposes inclined to enhancing women's empowerment (Figure 2). In all, 23% had purposes with a thrust towards sustainable economies and decent work. Climate and conservation issues were least embraced (15%) in purposes of the NPOs. Figure 2 shows the proportion of service-based NPOs that embraced specific purposes in their operations.

All NPOs operated through voluntary membership. Membership was through locally based structures such as clubs, which were affiliated to the parent organisations. The NPOs had clear outlines for membership acquisition and termination. Individual memberships to the parent organisations were through subscriptions. Individual membership subscriptions varied among the NPOs and ranged between US$36 and US$280 per year, with a mean and standard deviation of US$91.17 ± 65.63 per year. In all, 77% of the NPOs had strictly adult membership of above 18 years of age, and 23% had a mixture of adult and non-adult membership. The NPOs also embraced diversity in their membership and were inclusive of participants regardless of gender, professional inclination, academic level and socio-economic class.

The NPOs studied in this research contributed to solving global problems through their services and activities. Observed activities addressed some of the SDGs listed in the 2030 Agenda of the United Nations. A total of 15 SDGs out of the 17 were addressed in the activities of the organisations. The SDGs addressed were SDG1 (elimination of poverty),

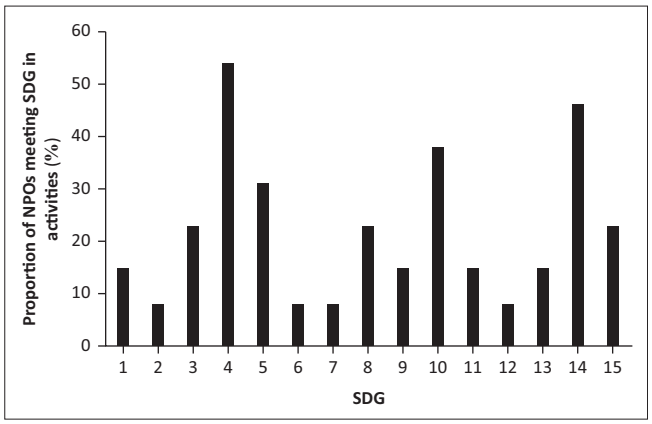


NPO, non-profit organisation.

FIGURE 2: Proportion of international service-based non-profit organisations embracing specific purposes in their operations.

SDG2 (elimination of hunger), SDG3 (good health and well-being), SDG4 (quality education), SDG5 (gender equality), SDG6 (clean water and sanitation), SDG7 (affordable and clean energy), SDG8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG10 (reduced inequalities), SDG11 (sustainable cities and economies), SDG13 (climate action), SDG14 (life below water), SDG15 (life on land), SDG16 (peace, justice and strong institutions) and SDG17 (partnership for the goals). The two most common SDGs addressed were SDG4 and SDG16, which were addressed by 54% and 46% of the NPOs, respectively (Figure 3). SDG9 on industry, innovation and infrastructure, and SDG12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns were not covered in the tenets of the 13 organisations that were assessed. SDGs 1, 10, 13 and 15 were each addressed by 15% of the organisations, SDGs 2, 6, 7 and 14 were each addressed by 8% of the organisations, SDGs 3, 8 and 17 were each addressed by 23% of the organisations, while SDG5 was addressed by 31% and SDG11 by 38% of the organisations. Figure 3 shows the SDGs addressed by the organisations assessed in this study and the proportion of organisations addressing each SDG.

Governance of the organisations that were assessed in this research was guided by binding constitutions and terms of reference. The parent organisation was run by a board of directors. The directors were elected into office and served specified durations of terms of office. All organisations exhibited a decentralised approach of governance through districts and/or zones at continental and country levels, and clubs at local levels. The type of governance across different levels was hierarchical, with the highest authority at the global level. Activities at the local scale contributed to the purposes of each organisation. Clubs were under the leadership of locally elected leaders or club officers who served for specified durations. Club leaders received training on leadership and on the operations of the NPOs prior to assuming office. All activities of clubs were carried out in a structured manner. Club activities were variable among the organisations depending on their purposes and goals. However, projects were a common activity used by the organisations to serve communities. Projects were structured to meet local needs and local contexts. Experiential LD was observed to be embedded in the approach taken in projects. The experiential learning embraced the needs of the modern learner through the use of approaches that simplified the learning experience, keeping it focused and practical.



SDG, sustainable development goal; NPO, non-profit organisation.

FIGURE 3: Sustainable development goals addressed by international service-based non-profit organisations assessed in the study and the proportion of organisations addressing each sustainable development goal.

Besides experiential learning, a number of additional LD approaches were observed in the NPOs. Direct approaches included retreats, workshops, seminars and webinars. Durations of these programmes ranged from a few hours, a day, several days, a week to several weeks. Programmes that ran for several weeks followed a consecutive or non-consecutive days approach. All LD programmes were open to members and were run systematically on a regular basis, giving members a platform for continuous learning throughout their membership period with the organisation.

A common direct approach of LD that was observed in all NPOs was the leadership training programmes, which were tailor-made to develop leadership skills in office bearers or leaders of the organisation. These programmes were observed at all levels of the organisations, from the global to the local levels. The training programmes were designed to train incoming leaders and were officiated by trained members of the organisation in collaboration with the past and outgoing leaders of the organisations. These programmes were in the form of retreats, workshops, seminars and webinars and could also take an experiential approach in the form of projects.

Another form of direct LD approach that involved the enrolment of beneficiaries at universities was observed in 54% of the NPOs. Enrolment varied from attending basic leadership courses at universities to attending full undergraduate or postgraduate degree programmes. This was achieved through fellowships that covered all or part of the expenses for the programs. Beneficiaries of fellowships could be members or non-members of the NPOs. In all NPOs offering fellowship programmes, the selection of beneficiaries was through an application process with clearly laid out eligibility conditions.

An indirect approach to LD was observed in the experiential approaches, which were embodied in running of services and activities of the NPOs. The organisations operated using structured formats with mentorship embodied in their activities, which exposed participants to LD. Mentorship was observed to be an integral operational component of all the organisations that were assessed.

Results revealed that NPOs engaged partnerships in their operations. Partnerships varied depending on the purposes of the organisations. Observed partnerships were with other non-governmental organisations, academic institutions, civil groups and local communities that collaborated in the execution of the NPOs' activities. Execution of activities by the NPOs embraced imparting citizen leadership skills to

participants, as some projects were crafted around solving local problems.

Funding characterised operations of all the NPOs assessed. All the assessed organisations had membership subscriptions. Donations were also a characteristic source of funding. Some organisations could also carry out fund-raising activities or apply for grants to finance their activities. All the organisations assessed incorporated three values in their funding systems, namely, transparency, integrity and accountability, which contributed to imparting some moral leadership skills to members.

Discussion

International service-based NPOs that were assessed in this research revealed various contributions towards the achievement of SDGs in Africa, covering 15 of the 17 SDGs in their tenets and activities. This was an important observation considering that various challenges have been highlighted in Africa's progress towards the achievement of SDGs. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report[36] on Africa's progress on attaining the SDGs and meeting the 2030 deadline, highlights that Africa's progress was uneven and accelerated efforts were required for the continent to meet the 2030 deadline. The report states that Africa was making progress in achieving the SDGs, but the number of targets on track was less than the number of targets that required acceleration or reversal.[36] The report emphasises the need for timely interventions in African countries to accelerate progress on attaining the SDGs and meeting the 2030 deadline.[36] Based on the results of this research, it is clear that further research is necessary to evaluate the efficacy of international service-based NPOs in contributing to the achievement of SDGs in Africa and match the findings to the continent's progress.

The low coverage of SDGs related to environmental issues that were observed in this study was a cause for concern, considering the importance of environmental issues in the 21st century. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)[37] elaborates on the importance of active participation of organisations and nations in the conservation of ecosystems and biodiversity. The framework[37] also elaborates on the importance of applying increased effort in adaptive and mitigation measures to impacts of climate change in order to maintain the rise in global temperature in this century well below 2 °C above the pre-industrial levels, while at the same time putting more effort to limit the temperature rise even further to 1.5 °C. To achieve this ambitious target, there is a need to strengthen the global response to the impacts of climate change across all sectors. The small proportion of international service-based NPOs that was observed to be focusing on environmental issues could be a pointer to the need for increased effort to boost the contribution of these organisations in environmental issues on the African continent. Considering that service-based NPOs contribute to LD as observed in the results of this research, low coverage of environmental issues could have implications for the training and nurturing of specific leadership skills that are directly linked to the environment. These leadership skills include skills such as the ability to identify and act on the crucial links between opportunities, costs, risks and the structural and operational adjustments associated with sustainable development.[38] A considerable relationship exists between leadership quality and sustainable development.[39] Low coverage of environmental issues by international service-based NPOs that was observed in this research could have a direct impact on the coverage of special leadership traits related to the environment in LD offered by these organisations, thus compromising the quality of leadership to effectively drive sustainable development on the African continent.

Two of the 17 SDGs were also observed to be not covered by the organisations that were assessed in this study. The UNDP report[36] highlights that Goal 9 is important for economic growth, social development and climate action, as these factors rely heavily on innovation, infrastructure and industrial development. On the other hand, Goal 12 focuses mainly on issues related to sustainable livelihoods of the present and future generations,[36] thus embracing environmental issues. Considering the importance of the two SDGs, it is important that more effort be made to enhance the coverage of the two goals in activities of international service-based NPOs operating in Africa. This would support the continent's effort towards achievement of the 2030 Agenda as well as improve the quality of LD offered by these organisations in Africa.

Governance and activities of international service-based NPOs that were assessed in this research were observed to span from local to international levels. This characteristic could be considered as important in LD as the structures, activities and programmes associated with the organisations presented members with exposure to both local and global contexts. This was in line with the New Leadership Theory, which emphasises LD that nurtures effective and adaptive leaders who are situation-oriented and capable of embracing the rapid change and complex environment associated with today's global landscape.[28] Research highlights that gaps exist in the necessary skills of effective leaders which are important for solving the prevailing global crises, particularly in Africa.[30] Africa needs leaders who are dynamic and highly adaptable to the situations of today's global village as well as to the local context. International service-based NPOs with their local and international attributes embraced local and international contexts, presenting members with opportunities to learn both local and international aspects of leadership.

International service-based NPOs displayed noticeable strength in LD through their experiential learning approach. This approach is viewed by many researchers as an effective way of training, which is associated with positive learning outcomes.[40,41,42] Experiential learning is an out-of-classroom

learning approach, which comes in several forms, such as project-based learning and service learning.[42] Individuals who go through the experiential learning approach learn from practical experiences, which are embedded in the natural consequences, mistakes and successes they go through during the learning process.[40,41]

Research has reported on the positive effects of experiential learning on cultural awareness in individuals.[42] Research has also reported on the positive effects of experiential learning on developing leadership and other professional skills, as well as on developing intellectual and interpersonal skills in individuals.[42] The Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory[42,43] asserts that the experiential learning approach is grounded in real experiences, active experimentation, critical observations and abstract conceptualisation. The learning approach embraces cognitions, prevailing environmental factors and contextual experiences, which all contribute to the learning cycle.[43,44,45]

The experiential learning approach that was observed in NPOs in this research embraced the needs of the modern learner through the use of approaches that simplified the learning experience by keeping it focused and practical. Simplified learning approaches have been reported to be effective in the 21st century, as they curb the negative effects of information overload.[46] The 21st century is characterised by rapid technological advancements, and the frequency of the changes is so high that it is leading to continuous overload of people with new information and new things to learn on a daily basis.[47] Information overload is experienced in three main ways, namely, exposure to massive quantities of information to learn, processing of massive quantities of information and retrieval and application of massive quantities of information.[48] These have negative effects such as burnout and cognitive pressures on individuals, which lead to poor decision-making and a significant reduction in productivity.[48] Effective approaches in training are important to avoid the negative effects of information overload. Training approaches that simplify the learning experience and keep it focused and succinct have been reported to be more effective for the modern learner compared to the intense approaches, as they allow multitasking engagements in individuals, allowing people to be interoperable and to focus on many things in one go.[9,46] This promotes agility in people and success in organisations. Research emphasises the importance of the ability to multitask and be interoperable in the 21st century.[9]

Another characteristic that was observed in the LD of the organisations that were assessed was the moral leadership approaches, which were present in their standard operating procedures. Nurturing of moral leadership skills could be achieved through participation in the activities of the organisations. Operations of the organisations were observed to be guided by some legally binding constitutions and terms of reference, which were accessible to all members of the NPOs, as well as to the general public. This promoted transparency and nurturing of moral leadership skills.

The governance approaches that were observed in the assessed NPOs, which embraced guidance by some terms of reference when electing new leaders and training of new leaders before assuming office, enhanced democracy and the culture of leadership continuity in these organisations. Effective handover–takeover practices promote transparency in organisations. Poorly managed succession is associated with dissatisfaction in organisations, which is detrimental to organisational performance.[49] Effective succession practices together with organisational transparency are key attributes of democracy and contribute to earning stakeholders' trust, which is essential in determining organisational performance. There is a positive correlation between organisational transparency and stakeholders' trust.[50] Organisational transparency enhances stakeholders' trust in an organisation, as transparency is associated with disclosure, clarity and accuracy of information and practices, which all determine an organisation's moral attitude towards society.[51] Where there is transparency, organisations can be rewarded for displaying trustworthy behaviour, or punished for displaying untrustworthy behaviour, and this has implications for the overall organisational performance.[52] Moral leadership skills are also critical in citizen leadership as they promote trust in community collaborations.

In this research, international service-based NPOs also emphasised transparency, integrity and accountability in their funding systems. This was another important moral leadership behaviour that was imparted to members through participation in the activities of the NPOs. In today's society, financial transparency is increasingly becoming an inevitable requirement for citizen leadership. Financial transparency has become a universal norm of organisational governance in the 21st century, as organisations continue to face admonishment pressure from citizens to be financially transparent, especially on public funds. The current society is facing challenges related to unethical practices and general poor performance, and these challenges could be emanating from the lack of effective leadership.[53] Financial transparency has been reported to be associated with citizen trust and willingness to participate and to pay, and this improves organisational performance and operational efficiency.[54,55] The world is currently going through numerous social, economic, environmental and political challenges, which are making moral leadership behaviour increasingly popular.[56] The diverse challenges faced by Africa require leaders of high quality at all levels of society[29,30] with ethical practices and high integrity. Integrity is one of the indispensable qualities of a leader.[57]

The organisations that were assessed in this research embraced diversity in their membership by accommodating people of different academic levels, professional engagements and socio-economic classes. This attribute had the potential

to enhance LD across different classes and different sectors, contributing to the collective expansion of the leadership bandwidth for communities. This attribute also contributed to the establishment of strong citizen leadership skills in communities. It is important to observe that any individual has the potential to engage in leadership roles at family, society, organisational, national and international levels. This reality is important for Africa, considering that the performance of societies, organisations and sectors is influenced by the quality of leadership available in different sectors. Organisational performance is influenced by the quality of leadership in any organisation.[53] International service-based NPOs, thus, presented an opportunity to extend leadership training to a large population in Africa regardless of their socio-economic and academic backgrounds, enhancing LD in communities, organisations and different sectors.

Mentorship was also observed as a key characteristic of LD in the organisations that were assessed. Mentorship is an important attribute of effective leadership and has been frequently used to meet the needs of a changing environment.[9,58] This is particularly important in the current business landscape, which is characterised by numerous changes. In a changing environment, mentorship enhances the knowledge and perspective of the business thrust in team members. Research emphasises the importance of mentorship in organisations, particularly on the importance of its effect on promoting the culture of interaction among different functional groups within an organisation.[13] Cross- functional collaborations promote trust and confidence among members of an organisation.[9] In addition, mentorship breaks silos in organisations, which has a positive influence on teamwork.[13] However, it is important to note that despite the importance of mentorship on organisational performance, recent research on LD revealed that only about a third (36%) of the global organisations have a formal mentorship programme for their leaders.[13] This statistic reveals an important gap in leadership training that currently exists in the world. Inclusion of mentorship in LD by international service-based NPOs, which was observed in this study, confirmed the importance of these organisations in filling some of the gaps that are present in today's African society.

The LD programmes offered by the studied NPOs were observed to be continuously open to members, giving members a platform for continuous learning throughout their membership period. Besides the tailor-made LD programmes, which were continuously offered to members, participation in systems and activities of these organisations also presented members with additional learning platforms throughout their membership period. Continuous training of aspects in leadership presented by the organisations kept individuals up to date with new information and new skills in leadership, which is a critical factor in the 21st century. The continuous learning platforms also provided a potential cost-effective means of LD that corporates and professionals in Africa could explore to enhance their competence in their leadership capacity because activities of the NPOs were rendered on a non-profit basis. This implied that participants would not be subjected to exorbitant costs, providing a potential cost-effective means of LD for professionals. This could be achieved through mere subscriptions and participation in the activities of the NPOs. This observation could significantly reduce the huge expenses that are associated with leadership training in the corporate world if fully explored. Research has revealed that globally, corporates expend exorbitant amounts annually on executive training,[13] with annual expenditure of more than 60 billion dollars on leadership training being reported by some researchers.[15] Exploring the potential value of international service-based NPOs in LD thus, presented potential means of reducing the huge expenses associated with executive training in corporates. This was particularly important for Africa as the money saved could be channelled towards other developmental issues on the continent. International service-based NPOs could be concluded to be offering cost-effective means of LD with potential room for exploration to enhance LD for the corporate world on the African continent.

Results of this study revealed the relevance and significant contribution of international service-based NPOs in LD and in solving problems in Africa. Complementing this effort with contributions of local NPOs presents great potential to enhance the continent's leadership bench-strength and competitive edge in the VUCA environment. Africa has a significant number of NPOs of local origin. Like international service-based NPOs, these local NPOs play important roles in offering services to communities.

Making reference to a specific example, ForAfrika is an Africa-confined NPO with activities that are designed to address community needs. The organisation was founded specifically to help alleviate problems in Africa and has operations in Mozambique, South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Central African Republic and Angola.[59] ForAfrika has been operating in Africa for four decades. The organisation's tenet, just like the tenets of international service-based NPOs assessed in this study, is crafted around serving and making a positive impact on communities. Analogous to international service-based NPOs, ForAfrika's activities contribute to meeting some SDGs through the organisation's core programming pillars in six areas, namely, humanitarian services in emergencies, water, food, health, education and economic empowerment.[59] Thus, through the core programming pillars, ForAfrika contributes to advancing Africa's effort to meet the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

ForAfrika facilitates the implementation of integrated community-led programmes that enhance transformational community development.[59] Leadership development is embedded in the implementation approaches of these programmes. The approaches include structured interventions that are organised and layered within and across the

organisation's core programming pillars. The ultimate goal is to assist communities in becoming self-sufficient.[59] Such approaches can be concluded to nurture citizen leadership through experiential learning. Integration of local contexts in implementation embraces cognitions and prevailing environmental factors, which together contribute to contextual experiences in LD, meeting the canons of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory.

Based on the operational insights on international service-based NPOs and Africa-based NPOs as revealed in this research, the importance of these organisations in LD and in meeting societal needs in Africa cannot be overemphasised. Exploring the value they offer has the potential to enhance the continent's performance and competitive edge in the 21st century. However, comprehensive analyses on governance and efficacy of these organisations are grey areas that require attention in order to expand the body of knowledge of NPOs in Africa. Funding, self-reliance, sustainability and accountability issues are some of the governance issues that have been highlighted by researchers to influence the success and impact of NPOs.[60] Research on these issues and on the power dynamics associated with governance of these organisations is highly recommended to assess the risks, challenges and operational dynamics of the organisations.

Study's limitations

This research only used information available on public platforms on the NPOs that were sampled. This data collection approach was used based on the justification that the research used a real-life scenario in data acquisition, where public platforms are the main sources of information used by the general public to gain knowledge on a subject. However, the use of information on public platforms only had potential pitfalls of not capturing all the information pertaining to the subject under investigation, especially information on confidential issues. This could have a potential effect on the amount of data collected and conclusions drawn from the study.

Conclusion

In conclusion, based on the findings of this research, international service-based NPOs contributed to solving problems faced by Africa in the 21st century as well as presented means of LD for the African continent. The organisations had LD embedded in their services and activities, which covered a wide spectrum of needs in the 21st century. The observed spectrum included training of special leadership skills for the 21st century, such as citizen leadership skills and moral leadership skills as well as coverage of SDGs. There was, however, a need to assess the efficacy of these organisations in Africa. Comparisons of the operational dynamics and efficacy of international service-based NPOs with Africa-confined NPOs were also necessary to generate information that would contribute to the body of knowledge of NPOs in Africa.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Edmore B. Gamundani: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Visualisation, Project administration, Software, Validation, Data curation, Resources, Writing – review & editing. Mubanga Mpundu: Supervision. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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Data availability

Datasets for this research are available from the corresponding author, Edmore Bernard Gamundani, upon reasonable request.

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