

Impact of Distributed Leadership on Project Outcomes within Organisations

SATYA SHAH, ENOCK MATSIMBE
Engineering Operations Management,
Royal Holloway University of London,
UNITED KINGDOM

Abstract: - This cross-sectional exploratory study aimed to draw insights on distributed leadership about project performance for increased accountability and societal impact by Local Non-Governmental Organisations (LNGOs). This study applied a multistage mixed model research design integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis procedures and techniques including interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis. The study found distributed leadership to occur in NGO projects with the involvement of all levels of management including field officers, middle managers, and executive-level management as well as other external agents in leadership activities. On the other hand, it found senior managers and executive-level managers dominate in all leadership roles than all other participants in leadership including field officers and external agents. The study found similar findings across projects using consortiums or single institutions for implementation, however, increased involvement in social leadership for field officers in projects implemented by single institutions and their higher involvement in organizing leadership roles in consortia projects than senior managers were exceptions. Participants of the study further considered having multiple leaders in a project to have considerable influence towards positive project outcomes in successful projects than least successful ones. In consideration of organization structure and the relationship of the extent of multiple management groups' involvement in distributed leadership activities and project performance, the study recommended the adoption of hybrid forms of distributed leadership to have effective project teams.

Key-Words: - Distributed Leadership, Local Non-Governmental Organizations, Social Leadership, Project Management, Project Teams, Document Analysis, Information Technology, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

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1 Introduction

Studies has shown that leadership in projects through four distributed leadership team roles namely, envisioning, organizing, social integration, and boundary-spanning leadership, [1]. Taking after freedom in Africa, countries have worked towards the fulfilment of socio-economic improvement and the eradication of poverty, inequality, and hunger through the implementation of meticulous developmental visions, policies, programs, plans, and projects, [2]. The World Bank projected that by 2017, infrastructure investment, increasing agriculture output, and an expanding service sector would lead to growth rates of up to 5.1% across the continent, [3]. On the contrary, despite implementing a broad array of projects supported by private, public, national, and international aid agencies across sectors, the rate of failure in projects remained more than 51% in Africa compared to other developing regions such as Asia, [4]. For example, [5] indicated that success rates for projects

addressing infrastructural gaps in Africa were less than 10%, whereas [6] reported success rates of only 44% in Information Technology (IT) projects among the service projects. This seemingly validates assertions by [7] of the causal relationship between the rate of project failure and stagnation in development outcomes for Africa. African countries, on the other hand, are heterogeneous in terms of macro factors including growth rates, and policy environment; however, [8] found this to have minimal influence (10-25%) on project outcomes than variability in rates of success across projects within countries. Thus, the level of variability in project outcomes within countries and high rates of failure for projects implemented in Africa raises questions about leadership practices in project teams executing the projects.

The effectiveness of development aid in eliminating poverty remains a contentious issue in international development with project failure attributed to local structural, institutional, and

project management capacity, as well as the nature and policy for providing international aid itself, [7], [9], [10]. According to [11], increasing aid amount in Africa would not lead to tangible change in the alleviation of poverty due to corruption and bad governance thereby resources should be allocated to local demand-driven initiatives.

Empirical evidence shows that Malawi is no exception to aid funding practices as proposed by [12] citing the proliferation of project management units, earmarked funding, and specialized procurement mechanisms away from national institutions across major aid agencies. This has led not only to an influx in the number of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) but also diversity in their scope of work, and increased levels of funding, [13]. In comparison with 1994 when there were 87 NGOs only, by 2013 there were over 550 NGOs registered with the Council for Non-Governmental Organizations in Malawi, [14]. They increasingly engaged in local development, for example, a review of revenue for the financing of community-prioritized projects in Balaka revealed that 31% of the total investment constituted funding from NGOs, Civil Society, and other non-government agencies, [13], [15].

Despite, the increased use of alternative funding modalities by International Aid Agencies, increased role of non-state players and empirical evidence into the causes of project failure in Africa, project management capacity remains a common theme for positive developmental outcomes. Nevertheless, both project leadership and project management research continue to focus on the project manager's competence and skills, style of leadership, and situational dictates, with the Project Management Institute (PMI) developing a framework for competency development and some NGO administering competency tests, [2], [16], [17].

This emphasis on a single individual ignores the contribution of other team members as well as the relational and collaborative nature of leadership practice in project teams, [18]. Further, in contemporary organizations, the project manager may not have a formal leadership role, and project teams can be drawn from diverse professionals across multiple organizations, and localities including freelancers, therefore, traditional notions of leadership may not be applicable. Studies argue for consensus and collective effort toward humanitarian goals, for the benefit of the affected population, frequently in challenging and unfriendly environments, [19]. They argue that formally appointed project leaders need to foster networking, communication, and team building that brings out

the leadership potential of others for continued project success.

Similar views for distributed leadership are also expressed by [20] who states that institutions should support spontaneous collaborations beyond individual formal leaders to encourage teamwork, social networking, and shared accountability across the organizational hierarchy. Studies [21] found distributed leadership to have a positive relationship with team performance. Research [22] stated that team performance was contingent on the structure of distributed leadership. They found distributed-coordinated structures to demonstrate superior team performance than traditional and distributed-fragmented structures. Studies [23] found hybrid models of distributed leadership in high-performing school leadership teams where the headteacher retained overall responsibility and authority.

Similarly, [24] also found a positive relationship between the effectiveness of US Transnational and leadership approaches that valued complementarity, grassroots approaches, diversification of strategy, and distributed organizational structures. In Australian NGOs, [25] found distributed leadership to occur at the senior executive level rather than among employees, with each leader directing activities in line with their respective areas of responsibility. [26] asserts that it remained imperative for NGOs to engage rural communities in the participatory development process including project identification and implementation for meaningful and sustainable development. In Malawi integrity and accountability issues persist in the NGO sector, Local NGOs have been characterized as having weak governance structures, patriarchal leadership with high levels of partisan politicism, and low accountability for project outcomes to their respective constituencies and government agencies, [13], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32].

Considering the context above, the study investigates distributed leadership in project teams implementing development and humanitarian projects in Malawi to draw insight into perceived performance toward anticipated outcomes. It uses a single case study institution, Find Your Feet Malawi (FYF), with multiple project units implementing development and humanitarian projects. FYF has an overall vision of a society in which citizens enjoy their social, economic, and cultural rights free from hunger and poverty. It seeks to transform the lives of vulnerable groups by mobilizing local knowledge and skills and promoting ownership and empowerment of poor rural to end hunger, and poverty and attain good health, [33].

1.1 Problem Statement

In Malawi, the NGO sector continues to expand in size, scope of work, and significance in socio-economic development, however, most local NGOs face leadership challenges in attaining strategic, technical, and financial capabilities for continued functioning and growth, [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20], [21], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32], [33], [34]. Most local NGOs and CSO networks have been unable to fill leadership roles from incumbent volunteers and founders involved in their formative stages, hence board-level oversight often remained loose with leadership centralized in such individuals rather than collective processes. The study [35] argues that despite the remarkable commitment and vision displayed by such NGO leaders, their consolidation of power is detrimental to organizational effectiveness. [36] found projects implemented by NGOs in Malawi to be unsustainable in alleviating poverty and deprivation. She argued that projects benefited the elite class and other intermediaries to create practices for a sustained flow of donor funding rather than alleviating the most vulnerable in society from pervading causes of poverty, [36].

Studies with NGO chief executives revealed the complexity of leadership, where multiple levels of an organization are expected to contribute towards leadership in shaping the direction and effective delivery of projects, [37]. This thereby demands significant reorganization of labour and power towards processes inculcating trust and mutual dependency among multiple players with unique expertise to achieve project and institutional goals and objectives, [38], [39]. The study thereby investigates the relationship between distributed leadership and project outcomes in local Non-Governmental Organisations. It explores the concept of team leadership as a vehicle for ensuring project performance and organizational accountability.

1.2 Research Purpose and Scope

The study seeks to draw insights on distributed leadership in relation to project performance for increased accountability and societal impact by local Non-Governmental Organisations (LNGOs). Unlike in traditional leader-follower contexts, for LNGOs to achieve their aforesaid requirements, an effective team environment for quality information processing, decision-making, and innovativeness is required, [40], [41]. The role of the project manager is coordinating and facilitating, where interactive team efforts are responsible for project outcomes beyond the abilities of a single individual leader, [42], [43]. The study will thereby investigate

distributed team leadership roles and their contribution to project success.

This research contributes to the body of knowledge on project leadership in the NGO sector of Malawi which is relatively under-explored compared to public and private sectors. It develops an in-depth understanding of leadership involvement in development projects implemented by local non-governmental organizations for the successful realization of efficiency and developmental goals, as well as improved accountability. The study is therefore useful not only for academic purposes but can also be informative for executive, managerial, and board-level development of systems for effective project leadership. Further, regulatory and coordinating bodies, namely, the NGO Board and CONGOMA can gain insights from this study to develop capacity and policy development initiatives for local NGOs, [14]. Second, the study contextualizes the practice of distributed leadership considering the local circumstances in which local NGOs operate. It thereby provides insights into structural barriers and strategies for effective distributed project delivery in a team setting.

The study aims to focus on some key **research objectives** and to address **research questions** through this research. To ascertain the occurrence of distributed leadership in non-profit project teams

- RO1. To identify factors that affect the distributed leadership in local NGO projects
- RO2. To ascertain how distributed leadership influences perceived project performance and local accountability
- RO3. To recommend strategies for distributed leadership in project teams for effective delivery of non-profit projects.
- RQ1. Is distributed leadership applicable to local non-governmental project teams implementing development projects?
- RQ2. What factors affect distributed leadership practices in projects implemented by local NGOs?
- RQ3. How does distributed leadership influence perceived project outcomes in local NGOs in Malawi?
- RQ4. What distributed leadership strategies could enhance the performance of non-profit projects in the Malawian context?

The study potentially could have some limitations:

- The finding of the study may not be generalizable to all local non-profit organizations due to its single case study

approach and uniqueness across the local NGO sector in terms of composition, purpose, locality, and experience. However, the embedded project units provide rich insights for distributed leadership.

- The study utilizes current and former employees of the case institution thereby may bias respondent responses due to the perceived acceptability notion of what constitutes leadership or even contempt for not currently being employed by the institution.
- Further, the human rights-based approach is the current predominant approach among development workers thereby similar concepts such as shared leadership, democratic leadership, and decentralization are considered normative thereby may bias responses.

2 Literature Review

The review of theory and concepts surrounding distributed project leadership and its relation to project performance with a special focus on the local non-governmental organization (NGO) in the Malawian context is the key focus within this section. The first two subsections provide a comparative analysis of predominant categories of leadership theory and distributed leadership in organizational research. Sub-sections four to six provided context for project management and distributed leadership in the context of project teams in local NGOs. It concludes by highlighting empirical evidence of the relationship between distributed leadership and project success.

2.1 Leadership Theory

Since time immemorial, humankind has grappled with the issue of leadership with variable definitions and understanding emerging across fields of inquiry including disciplines such as management, business, psychology, and political science. Study [44] identified four characteristics of leadership, namely: 1) as a process, 2) involving influence, 3) involving a group context and 4) concerned with goals. In such context of theory, this paper defines leadership as dynamic and multifaceted processes through which visions and organizational goals are articulated, and the right supporting environments for their attainment are created for increased creativity, productivity, well-being, and growth for those involved, [45], [46]. Despite the interactive group context of leadership, research and theorization of leadership continue to be leader-centric focusing on traits and characteristics, skills and competencies, behavioral aspects, and the situation, [44]. The sub-

sections below review leader-centric theories of leadership.

2.1.1 Heroic Leadership Accounts (Personality, Skills, and Transformational Leaders)

The heroic accounts of leadership focus on attributes innate to individuals who become leaders, (namely, personality, values, motives, and needs), skills of successful leaders, and their charismatic and affective approach towards change, [44]. First personality trait approaches sought to identify prescriptive traits that determined the effectiveness of organizational leaders rather than situational factors and the influence of other organizational members that determined organizational performance, [47]. Studies [46] isolated several traits for leadership effectiveness including high levels of energy and tolerance to stress; internal locus of control orientation; emotional maturity; personal integrity; socialized power motivation; moderately high achievement orientation; moderately high self-confidence; and moderately low need for affiliation. Successful leaders, thereby, were to be rooted in the belief of their role in shaping the course of events rather than being fatalistic; have high resilience in the face of hectic situations and schedules for the attainment of goals; were people of high integrity and were emotionally aware of themselves and others they worked with, however, did not require high levels of social approval to function. Second, the competence-based heroic approach unlike the personality traits emphasizes on unique but acquirable skill sets (including knowledge and competencies) possessed by leaders that enable them to accomplish set objectives. Research asserts that leaders ought to have technical proficiency in specified jobs, good people skills, and conceptual abilities to drive organizational performance and change, [44]. Lastly, the transformational leadership approach, focuses on the leader's ability to work with other members of his or her team towards change through inspiration, consideration of team and individual needs, intellectual stimulation, and being role models of required behaviours, [44]. This contrasts with other leader-centric approaches where the leadership involves affective, networking, and charismatic aspects, unlike simple exchanges including career progression and financial incentives.

Research on leadership in the non-profit sector seems to emphasize the heroics of leadership. In line with personality traits for high energy and resilience to stress, described NGO leaders as operating in isolated and volatile contexts with extended periods

of minimal financing to address the needs of otherwise vulnerable and marginalized populations, [47]. Further, in the quest for viability, credibility, and sustainability of organizations, the non-profit sector is hinged towards identifying key individual leadership competencies reflecting respective organizational values as is the case with Redcross, SaveTheChildren, and Care among others, [48]. Furthermore, strong leadership, where leaders provide and demonstrate vision through action which followers are expected to model after has been associated with organizational development for non-profits, [37].

On the other hand, heroic accounts by being leader-centric ignored dynamic influences on leadership beyond traits and competence. Studies [49] assert that leadership roles are influenced in structure, behaviour, and content by dynamic relations with followers. It thereby had weak causality with performance factors in teams which are basic units for NGO operations and projects, [44]. Further, the rights-based approach and evolving donor focus in the NGO sector, challenge traditional leadership styles and associated elitism, in the quest for the realization of social, political, and economic rights, [37], [44].

2.1.2 Behavioral Accounts of Leadership

Behavioral accounts of leadership focus on the actions of leaders, as either overly concerned with the achievement of the tasks, relationship aspects with the employee, or change-orientated to provide the framework for effective leadership behaviour in relation to organizational goals, [46]. Task-orientated behaviour is a broad meta-category that encompasses behaviour concerned with organizing tasks efficiently and reliably to deliver the output required, whereas, the relationship-oriented behaviour category focuses on expanding shared trust, participation, work fulfilment, and identification with the group or institution, [44], [46]. Figure 1 summarizes leadership styles adopted by leaders to attain organizational goals as identified [50] with a keen focus on task and relationship orientations namely: impoverished management, country-club management, middle-of-the-road management, authority compliance, and team management.

The behavioral school of leadership provides a broad framework for analysing leadership styles. Despite [44], asserting a weak association between leadership behaviour and organizational outcomes, several recent studies found leadership style as a moderator variable for organizational performance and other precursors for performance such as

organizational culture, morale, commitment, and job satisfaction, [51], [52], [53], [54], [55]. On the other hand, [50] despite recommending the idealness of team management, the framework fails to recognize other team leadership roles including envisioning leadership identified for the management of projects [56]. The approach also fails to account for contextual and situational factors of interaction that influence leadership, [56].

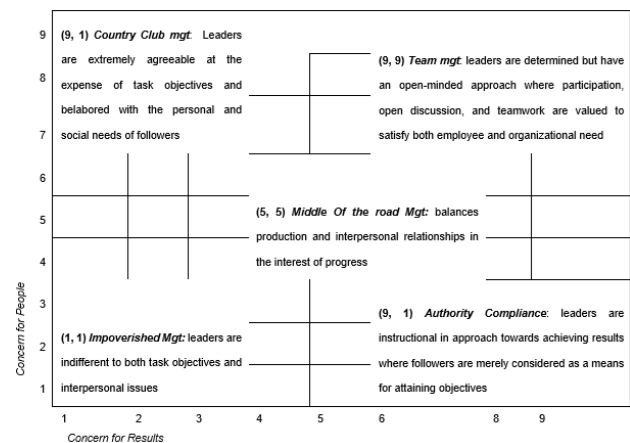


Fig. 1: The Leadership Grid (Adapted from [44])

2.1.3 Situational Accounts of Leadership

The situational account of leadership is comparable to behavioral approaches in its recognition of both directive and supportive behavioral aspects of leaders. It however diverges in that effective leaders are viewed as those able to adjust their style with the context of operation, specifically, with the level of competence and commitment of followers, [44], [56]. The situations approach stressed flexibility in leadership activities in an intuitive and prescription approach, thereby, offering a wide range of appropriate styles in the context of the level of development and motivation. On the contrary, as with the behavioral school, it fails to account for external influences and leadership roles in interactive teams.

2.2 Distributed Leadership

Considering the challenges of leader-centric theories as discussed earlier and advancement in the complexity of the organizational context and leadership in modern society, distributed leadership has become a common focus of research. Distributed leadership offers a system-wide view of leadership as having emergent properties based on interaction among people within socially defined contexts; where multiple individuals have unique expertise or capabilities; and the organizational hierarchy is a factor among other sources of influence toward shared goals, [39]. It focuses on

engaging multiple players both horizontally and vertically in the organizational hierarchy including informal groups and informal leaders in and around an organization for conjoint efforts, coordinated agency, and action towards shared objectives commonly referred to as, concrete action, [57]. According to [57], concrete action is contrasted with concrete action where leaders are independent of each other, diachronic, with limited knowledge sharing and there are no procedures for passing on leadership. As conceptualized by [57], concerted action emerges through institutionalized practice, intuitive working relations, and spontaneous collaboration. First, the institutionalized practice involves careful formalized design considerations or systematic adaptation of specific functions by organizational members, i.e., constituting teams and committees. Second, intuitive working relations describe situations where organizational members develop mutually beneficial and interdependent working relationships over time. And last, spontaneous collaboration is where groups with different but complementary expertise required to accomplish a specific task temporarily unite for that specific task. This is a configuration where leadership is intuitively assumed with little or no planning based on the functions and requirements of tasks.

With few exceptions, distributed leadership has been heavily investigated in the education sector, including its positive proven relation between teachers' self-efficacy, motivation, development of academic capacity, student outcomes, and the degree of involvement of teachers in decisions towards their areas of interest, [58], [59], [60]. Cross-national studies in other sectors had similar findings in relation to participation in leadership tasks, or Distributed Leadership Agency (DLA). Studies found a positive relationship between employee occupational self-efficacy in the Danish public service sector, similarly, with trust, commitment, and satisfaction in Italian Public Hospitals, [61]. This study investigates distributed leadership from the context of non-governmental organizations in Malawi, a highly underexplored context, yet considered an alternative to government-led projects in development aid and vehicle for guaranteeing citizens voice and accountability, [30].

2.3 Project Management and Leadership

Project teams and leadership have long been recognized as central to achieving organizational goals, learning, and growth. Paradoxically, project management literature seldom treats leadership as a

critical factor for project success, [62], [63]. The Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) highlights the centrality of effective teams and integration of efforts as critical project success factors but does not recognize project leadership itself as a distinct knowledge area, [64]. Further, [65] recognizes leadership as a complexity associated with organizational structure and a key requirement for the project board, however, it views project leadership as a highly variable concept for focus in PRINCE2. Most leadership research exacerbates the situation with a continued focus on individual leaders and their effect on motivation, job satisfaction, and productivity toward achieving organizational goals and objectives rather than systemic accounts, [65], [66], [67], [68]. Similarly, project management literature is seldom devoid of similar accounts focusing on the role of the project manager, [69], [70], [71].

2.4 NGO Leadership in Africa

With the growth of the NGO sector, a leadership deficit has become a topic of concern with [48] pointing to leadership development as using traditional approaches rather than best practices and experiences from the Sector. NGO Leadership in the developing context has often been discussed from a framework of the influence of culture on the style of leadership, [48], [72]. African NGO leaders have been described as displaying high levels of commitment to the collective specifically family, clan, and tribe, however, they faced immense pressure to maintain professional relations at the same time, [72]. Similarly in the Malawian Context, [48] points out that NGO leaders faced immense pressure from competing demands including requirements for economic rationality and efficiency in project management from the global aid world; socio-political and economic expectations, and pressures on project resources from the urban community including their workforce and socio-political hierarchies in society; and their moral obligations to their extended family in a mostly rural setting. Studies by [73], however, found work values and collectivist cultural context of leadership as key determinants of project success in Africa rather than the mere application of project management tools and techniques that reflect values of the Western context. [35] on the other side warns of how such paternal leadership and mostly charismatic leadership can be detrimental to the growth and long-term survival of an NGO.

Leadership studies have mainly concentrated on NGO boards and identifying senior executive-level competencies or style as the panacea to the issue of

performance, ignoring the interactive and collaborative nature of team efforts responsible for project outcomes, [1], [74]. Studies by [75] found that distributed leadership has a great influence on the performance of teams. In the NGO sector, however, [25] found that distributed leadership occurred at the senior executive level than among employees in Australian NGOs. A search on distributed leadership in NGOs in the African context including Malawi yielded minimal results with most research being done in education and health sectors elsewhere. This study investigates distributed leadership from a lower level of analysis of project teams implementing not-for-profit projects. It will first ascertain the occurrence of distributed leadership in project implementation units and determine how it influences perceived project performance. It will further identify factors in the local context that affect distributed leadership to generate insight into programming.

2.5 Distributed Leadership and Project Teams

Distributed leadership has specifically been found to contribute to the effective organization of labour and power toward organizational development and change, [38], [39]. Strategic and inclusive operational processes based on trust and mutual dependencies are seen to contribute towards positive organizational performance and change. Further, [46] asserts that precursors for organizational performance are the level of coordination and cooperation towards common goals and priorities among multiple interdependent leaders or with shared responsibility for projects or sub-units. Studies [21] found distributed leadership to have a stronger influence on team performance than gender, team size, and modes of communication. [43] identified four distributed leadership team roles required for the successful management of projects, namely, envisioning, organizing, social integration and boundary spanning. Envisioning leadership is concerned with facilitatory roles for vision building including goal setting and problem-solving; Organizing leadership is concerned with task efficiency and structure including work breakdown, scheduling, and adherence to datelines; Social Leadership deals with psycho-social dynamics for maintaining a conducive team environment for participation, conflict resolution, and maintaining right energy levels; Spanning Leadership is concerned the public relations aspects for the team including networking, information gathering, exploring socio-political barriers in the environment, and acquiring essential resources for

the functioning of the team, [43]. Studies further asserted that self-managed teams need to time develop and possess the right combination of the four roles to be successful, where envisioning must drive the creative direction setting processes, spanning contributes to sourcing of information and funds for the team as well as public relations aspects, organizing roles need to spearhead structure and processes for team activities, and social leadership ensures integration, cohesion, and conflict resolution.

On the other hand, [58] and [76] assert that not all patterns of distributed leadership have a positive effect on organizational development; uncoordinated efforts are likely to result in conflicting interests and objectives. This corroborated earlier findings by [77] where structural characteristics in distributed leadership variably influenced team performance outcomes. Further, [78] asserts that is a tool for maintaining the status quo in an institution rather than driving change, where structural barriers, do not guarantee equality for participation for all including gender and ethnicity. Research also caution practice and research from a distributed perspective as potentially operating from a colonial position to marginalized groups, with no real autonomy and empowerment, and other factors influencing leadership practice than expertise alone, [79]. The study [80] argues for a reconsideration of distributed leadership towards hybrid models incorporating hierarchical and heterarchical elements of emergent activities in organizations. [81] further explored concepts of dependency of action and role space to identify four distributed leadership configurations, namely, shared; conjoint; fragmented, and dispersed distributed leadership. Table 1 highlights possible configurations of distributed leadership and common underlying facets that influence each of the configurations including the attributes of the leader, the nature of the task, and characteristics of the context.

The study explores distributed leadership across multiple projects implemented under Find Your Feet from the perspective of teams. It explores concepts of distributed team leadership roles in projects, hybridity, and leadership configuration to generate insights into distributed leadership in project teams for the effective delivery of non-profit projects.

The literature review has demonstrated issues surrounding leadership in the NGO sector and project management in NGOs in the African context. In general terms, distributed leadership remains an under-explored concept in the non-profit sector with an orientation towards the development

of competencies with few mentions of the need for the development of new capacities within the institution and addressing the leadership deficit facing the sector. A conceptual framework is as shown in Figure 2.

Table 1. Distributed Leadership (DL) Configurations and Underlying Determinants, [81]

DL Configuration	Determinants
Shared DL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formally anchored or informal relationship for concerted action and shared role Space. Simultaneous integration of knowledge and capability.
Conjoint DL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concertive action with different role spaces due to Interconnectedness and interdependence of functions Collective or mutual influence of the team on individual members entrenched through a web of interpersonal relationships.
Fragmented DL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numeric action within the same role space either at one stage (where there is a need to cooperate) or different stages (knowledge sharing). Need for explicit definition of roles and relationship between roles
Dispersed DL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Numeric action and separate role spaces. Value is on autonomy where formal leaders aggregate action in teams

Common Influencing Factors	Common Influencing Factors
<p>Common Influencing factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participatory Leadership Style Leaders with weak integration skills and High Task Complexity Non-modular tasks High knowledge intensity for tasks Collectivist context High dynamic technology context Team relationships characterized by high social exchange. 	<p>Common Influencing factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Autocratic leadership style Leaders with strong integration skills Low Task Complexity Task modularity Low knowledge intensity Individualistic context Lower dynamic technology context Low social exchange relationships within the team.

The review demonstrated significant gaps in research on distributed leadership and project teams, with research mainly focusing on board and senior management levels rather than employees who may not hold official management positions. Further, research on NGO leaders and project management

in Africa points to detrimentally culturally influenced paternal patterns and high-power distance. The study investigates project performance from a distributed leadership analysis in project teams to develop insights for improved project and organizational performance. As discussed, the study takes into consideration the influence of the organizational structure in influencing distributed project leadership practice. Project financing and partnership in the implementation of projects may also mediate the effectiveness and nature of distributed project leadership in project teams toward project success as shown in Figure 1.

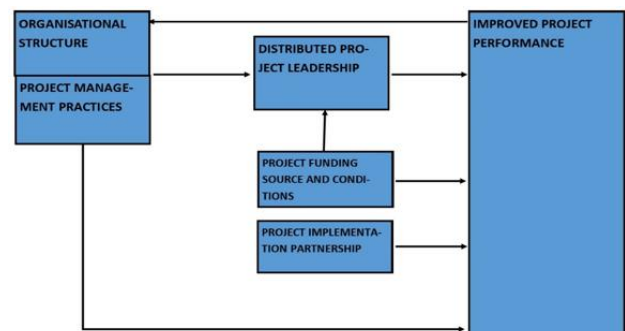


Fig. 2: Conceptual Framework

3 Research Methodology

This section details the overall design of the study to address the research questions earlier highlighted to generate insights on distributed leadership in relation to project performance. The study draws from the conceptualization of the research onions by [82] as a way of connecting the overall aim of the study with research philosophies, approaches, strategies, methods, timeframe, and data collection and analysis choices shown in Figure 3.

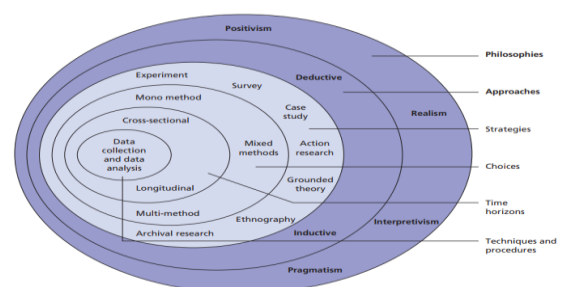


Fig. 3: Research Onion, [82]

3.1 Research Philosophy

According to [82], research philosophy constitutes sets of beliefs and assumptions concerning the development of knowledge. In business research, ontology and epistemology are the core philosophies of concern, [83].

Ontology concerns itself with the nature of reality and has two distinct approaches to research: (1) objectivism which views social reality as external to social actors, whereas; (2) in subjectivism, social phenomenon is a product of perception and action of social actors.

Epistemology, on the other hand, has three philosophies concerned with what constitutes acceptable knowledge: (1) in positivism information on social phenomena is only credible if observable and in the tradition of natural sciences can be collected in a value-free manner to test hypotheses and make generalizations following structured procedures and methods; (2) interpretivism emphasizes the need to understand social phenomena from the viewpoint of the study subjects as humans are constantly making sense of the world around them [82]; and (3) pragmatism is utilitarian in that focus is on practical aspects of research to draw insight on real-world problems from multiple perspectives thereby both objective and subjective meanings are acceptable unlike concerning with nature of reality, [82], [84].

This study thereby adopts pragmatism as its research philosophy to investigate distributed leadership in development project teams in relation to performance. It recognizes that distributed leadership is a multifaceted concept involving multiple interacting players in leadership activities in complex environments where understanding of organizational processes may depend on knowledge, experience, and interpretation of project staff rather than documentation, [80], [82], [84].

3.2 Approach

Business research can be conducted through deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive research approach is characterized as using structured methods to quantitatively test hypotheses to validate theory, [85]. On the other hand, the inductive research approach generally aims to develop knowledge on areas of specific interest to the researcher through detailed observation of the world where reality is a complex phenomenon, [82]. The uniqueness of the inductive approach is the consideration of context, collection of qualitative data, less need to generalize, the researcher being part of the process, and the aim of understanding attached meaning to issues, [82]. Given the social nature and practice of distributed leadership in organizations, this study follows both inductive and deductive approaches, [82]. This study investigates distributed leadership in the context of development and humanitarian projects to draw practical insights for project team leadership in local NGOs.

3.3 Strategy

The study takes an exploratory research design where distributed leadership is investigated in the context of teams in a local NGO. In exploratory research, the main aim is to draw insights into an area of interest or social phenomenon, while other research designs such as explanatory and descriptive research detail causal relationships and profile phenomena respectively, [82]. The study thereby adopts a single case study--Find Your Feet Malawi, with embedded sub-units in the form of project teams as its research strategy. This research strategy aims to develop rich knowledge of distributed leadership in project teams, [86], [87]. Find Your Feet Malawi is a local Non-Governmental Organization with a local board and benefits from multiple sources of funding across a diverse portfolio of projects, [33].

3.4 Methods

In business research, one is faced with the choice of using either a single qualitative or quantitative procedure for collecting data and corresponding analysis (referred to as mono-method) or integrating both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques and analysis procedures (multiple-methods) in line with their research problem. Common data collection techniques in social research include (1) Questionnaires: These are documents or forms comprising schedules of questions on a specific topic to collect standardized information in a study. Questionnaires contain a broad range of questions which may include response options such as multiple choices, dichotomous responses, checklists, and rating scales.

Questionnaires can be administered physically, and electronically through emails, websites, or computer-assisted interfaces, [88]. These are particularly useful in quantitative research designs and offer flexibility in administration including online options i.e., email and websites; (2) Interviews interaction-based data collection methods characterized by an exchange between the researcher and one or more (focus group) participants to generate negotiated contextually based results, [89]. Interviews generate in-depth information using probing techniques and natural rapport, however, often require strong facilitation skills, human resources, and time; Observations: these are an in-depth but unobstructed data collection technique where the researcher integrates into the natural context of people under study. It is a highly utilized technique in ethnography, however, requires longer periods of study including reiteration

to get in-depth knowledge. Document analysis involves a review of archival documents and government records among other published resources. Other data collection methods include laboratory experiments, online analytics tools,

The study is mixed model research incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques for collecting and analysing data at multiple stages of the study. Given the nature of the case study, there is a need to understand in-depth the organizational leadership processes as well as the quantitative differences across the sub-units (project). For the qualitative data collection methods, the study used semi-structured interviews and document reviews to generate an in-depth understanding of processes and develop common constructs across variables for further quantitative data collection. For quantitative data collection methods, the study used a structured questionnaire. In terms of analysis, the study used content analysis procedures to analyse qualitative data and statistical analysis procedures to analyse quantitative data.

3.5 Sampling Strategy

The study aimed to draw insights on distributed leadership in relation to project performance, thereby, a non-probability sampling strategy was adopted. Unlike in probability sampling, where a representative subset of the population is identified randomly with each member is having a non-zero likelihood of being selected; non-probability sampling draws participants based on the researchers' discretion, [90]. Common criteria and techniques for non-probability selection of study participants include the level of accessibility (convenience sampling); volunteerism/self-selection (voluntary response sampling); deemed informativeness and relevance (purposive sampling) and referral systems in unreachable populations (snowball sampling), [82]. The study sequentially applied purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify participants from the case study institution. First was purposive sampling focusing on project management experience of not less than 2 years. This involved engaging the Finance and Administration Manager of Find Your Feet to identify executive-level managers and project officers engaged in projects that involved two or more team members for implementation, specifically, within the past 5 years (2016-2021). The second was the snowball technique, where the identified project officers would recall two cases of projects, one extremely successful and the other a failure to identify at least two individuals involved in each for the administration of questionnaires. By

combining the two non-probability sampling techniques, the study would avoid the risks of information saturation and theoretical redundancy in responses, [91].

Table 2. Sample Size

Stage	Sampling Method	Targeted Population	Number
1	Purposive Sampling	Senior(executive level) and Junior(middle level) Managers	8
2	Snowball Sampling	Field Officers/Administrative Officers	32
Sample Size			40

Sample size: In line with the research design and strategy as well as the sampling process, the sample size for the study was 40, with 8 senior and junior managers and 32 field officers to achieve adequacy for information collected to generate a rich understanding of project distributed team leadership and performance of projects (Table 2).

3.6 Data Collection

The study collected data through semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and a review of relevant project documents. A semi-structured interview schedule including a balance of pre-coded and open-ended questions to enable the interviewer to guide the conversation and pick up cues and themes raised by the respondents was utilized to collect primary data, [88]. It further collected data through a pre-coded structured questionnaire informed by both theory and content analysis of findings from semi-structured interviews to collect data with remotely located study participants through online self-completion and telephone interviews where necessary. Secondary data was obtained from documents including strategic implementation plans, organizational manuals, project completion reports, evaluation reports, and result frameworks among others. Documents represent social artifacts produced, shared, and utilized in socially planned contexts with little influence on the researcher, [92]. These were thereby used to get data on the context of projects, supplement details, as well as, to verify research findings.

3.7 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis was done through several processes highlighted below.

Directed Content Analysis

Content analysis refers to the process of sorting out information into constructs related to the main

question of the research study, [92]. Directed content analysis takes a structured approach using pre-existing theory to identify key concepts as initial coding categories, and recoding of outlier categories, [93]. This study, it involved reading all transcripts generated from interviews and highlighting key thoughts which were used to develop initial coding to develop categories based on the interrelatedness of emerging themes with project management theory and distributed leadership theory.

Data Entry and Data Analysis

(Kobo Toolbox, Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) and Microsoft Excel)

An entry template incorporating recurrent categories was developed in the Kobo toolbox to facilitate direct web-based data entry as well as the entry of manual transcripts of structured interviews and questionnaires by the researcher. Following the completion of data entry and collection, the dataset was exported from the Kobo toolbox to SPSS for primary descriptive data analysis including frequencies, cross-tabulation, and ratios as well as means and correlation, [94]. Microsoft Excel was utilized for developing reader-friendly but concise graphs, pie charts, and tables for incorporation into the write-up of the report.

Document Analysis

This is an unobtrusive and non-reactive approach to acquiring empirical data that involves a systematic review of documents, [92]. In this study, document review is utilized to obtain contextual information for projects including strategic guiding documents, organization structure, and organizational policies and strategies. Document review was also used to verify findings from semi-structured interviews including conceptual and performance-related factors for projects.

3.8 Research Ethics

The study was conducted in line with the deontological approach to research which guarantees adherence to ethical conduct in research, unlike teleological views which only focus on the end of the research process itself. It abided by the following ethical principles:

- The Informed Consent: the study communicated the purpose of the research project to sample participants for their discretionary and voluntary involvement in all research processes.
- Privacy-confidentiality and data protection: Minimal personal information was collected

through interviews (including the use of pseudonyms) and the dataset collected was analysed and presented in a way that would not allow the re-identification of participants.

- Validity: The findings of the study represent an accurate analysis of information collected from study participants and are free from falsification

This study adopts pragmatism as its research philosophy to investigate distributed leadership in development project teams in relation to performance. Given the social nature and practice of distributed leadership in organizations, this study follows both inductive and deductive approaches. It adopts a single case study with embedded sub-project team units as its research strategy to develop rich knowledge on distributed leadership in project teams. Similarly, mixed model research methods incorporating both quantitative and qualitative techniques for collecting and analysing data at multiple stages of the study were utilized. For the qualitative data collection methods, the study used semi-structured interviews and document reviews. For quantitative data collection methods, the study used a structured questionnaire. The study sequentially applied purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify participants from the case study institution. A total of 40 participants were targeted by the study including project officers and field officers. Data analysis and interpretation involved directed content analysis and statistical analysis in SPSS.

4 Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the findings from the data collection process concerning the overall aims and specific objectives of the study. The section is structured in three main parts - demographic details, distributed leadership in non-profit projects, and project performance and distributed leadership.

Table 3. Study Tools, Participants, and Response Rate

Data Collection Technique/Participants	Study Target	Actual Achieved	Response Rate
Interviews	8	7	88%
<i>Senior Project Officers; /Senior Managers</i>	8	7	
Questionnaires	32	21	66%
<i>Field Officers</i>	32	21	
Grand Total	40	28	70%

The study collected data through three main techniques semi-structured face-to-face interviews, online self-completed structured questionnaires, and document analysis for in-depth data collection, cost-effectiveness, and cross-validation of findings respectively, [95]. A total of 7 face-to-face interviews with senior project officers and senior managers and 21 electronic self-completion questionnaires were completed by 28 field officers and junior project managers shown in Table 3. The study thereby achieved an overall 70% response rate with an 88% (7 of 8) completion rate in interviews and 66% (21 of 32) return rate of questionnaires completed. In line with recommendations [96], it exceeded the acceptability threshold of a 50% response rate in business research.

4.1 Demographic Details

This sub-section provides profiles of the participants of the study. Demographic information allows for comparison across contexts, the discussion specifically focuses on dimensions of gender, level in the organization, educational attainment, and work experience.

4.1.1 Respondent Gender and Level in Organization

The study drew up to 50% of its participants from field or administrative levels whereas junior management and senior management constituted 36% and 14% respectively (Figure 4).

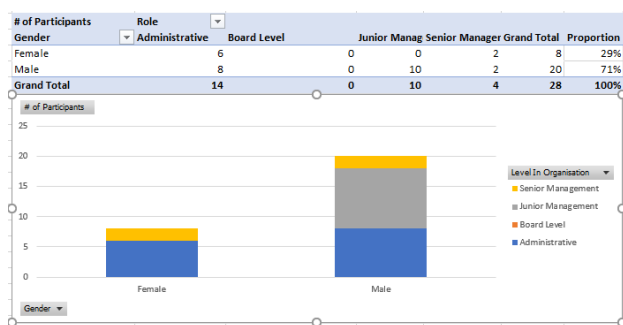


Fig. 4: Gender and Respondent Role

Participation in the study was however dominated by male respondents (71%) compared to their female counterparts (29%). Apart from equal gender representation among senior management, junior managers were exclusively male, whereas male respondents constituted 57% and female respondents 43% at administrative or field-level positions in line with institutional employment levels.

4.1.2 Educational Attainment and Working Experience in Projects

Among the study participants, 7% held doctoral level qualifications, technical and graduate level qualifications constituted 21% of educational attainment each, and up to 50% of the respondents held a bachelor’s degree level qualification (Figure 5).

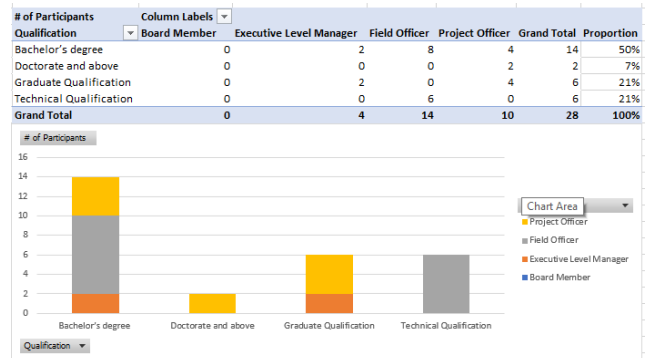


Fig. 5: Respondent Role and Education Attainment

Doctoral and graduate-level participants mostly held junior and senior-level posts in the institution, namely executive-level manager, and project officer roles, however, bachelor’s degree holders were present at all levels of the organization including in administrative or field roles, whereas technical qualification holders mostly worked at field level and administrative roles. The average working experience on development projects for the respondents was 8 years, with 1 year of working experience being the least experience and 18 years of working experience being the most. Results of the Pearson correlation showed a significant correlation between average working experience and educational attainment, ($r(28) = .683, p=0.01$). Except for technical qualification holders, participants of the study had working experience at all organizational levels namely, junior management, senior management, and board-level positions (Figure 6).

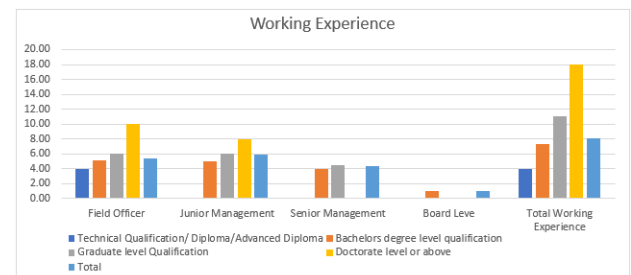


Fig. 6: Working Experience by Qualification and Organisational Level

4.2 Distributed Leadership in Non-Profit Projects

This subsection addressed the occurrence of distributed leadership in non-profit project teams. It specifically explored the concept through the four distributed team leadership roles identified by [1], namely envisioning, spanning, organizing, and social leadership. Respondents were asked to identify all key functions that engaged in the distributed leadership tasks during the implementation of projects they were or are engaged in during their tenure with Find Your Feet. It further explored factors for the management of projects and their effect on distributed leadership in projects including organization structure, sources of funding, and implementation approaches adopted. Furthermore, the study explored how having multiple leadership contributors affected the level of success in projects.

4.2.1 Organisational Structure and Distributed Leadership

The study found minimal involvement of board-level (1%) and donor agencies (6%) in specific team leadership roles during the implementation of project activities, however, senior managers (36%) and middle managers (32%) dominated on all four team leadership roles than field officers (25%) (Figure 6). On the other hand, organizing leadership roles was an exception where middle managers (41%) and field officers (33%) dominated over all other levels in the institution.

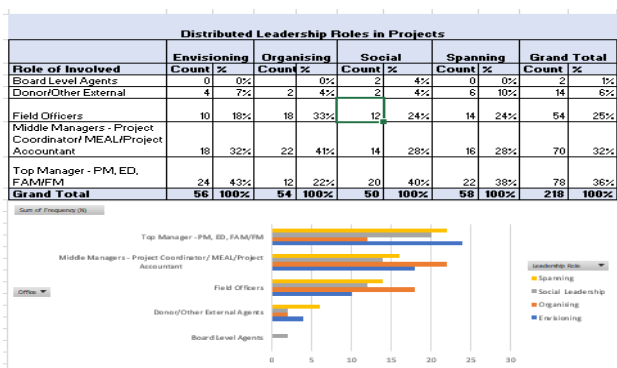


Fig. 7: Distributed Leadership in Project Teams

The study found the field officers reported higher mean numbers for management levels to be involved in leadership activities for envisioning, external spanning, organizing, and social leadership roles (2.3, 2.4, 2.3, and 2.1) in successful projects compared to their counterparts in the least successful projects (2, 2, 1.3, and 1) and all other organizational levels (Figure 7).

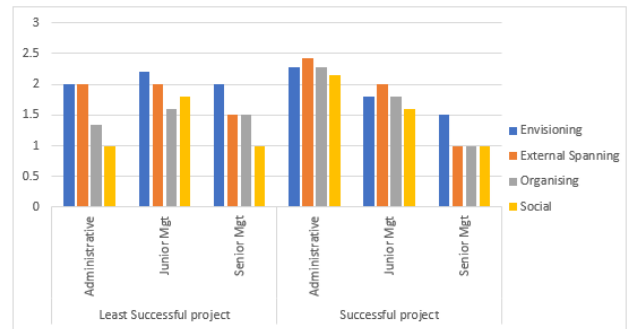


Fig. 8: Groups Involved in Distributed Leadership and Respondents Management Position

Except for junior managers reporting higher group involvement (1.8) in social leadership compared to 1 for both senior managers and field/administrative level positions, least successful projects did not have pronounced differences for all other leadership roles.

Pearson correlations tests similarly found a negative correlation ($r(28) = -.505, p=0.01$) between the level of management for participants and the number of levels of management reported to be involved in distributed leadership in successful non-profit projects unlike least successful ones ($r(20) = -.004, p=0.986$). A review of the institution's personnel manual affirmed the findings on increased involvement of Senior Managers in distributed leadership roles in line with their overall oversight function over strategic planning, financial management, and human resources management; similarly, Project Officers were holders of project budgets and had control over activities performed by field officers in their respective projects to deliver key milestones within time, cost, quality and sustainability requirements; the increased involvement of field officers in organizing roles is in line with their role and placement in project teams for execution of activities, [97]. The involvement of field officers, middle managers, and senior managers as well as external agents in distributed team leadership roles thereby established that the practice of leadership involves more than formerly appointed project managers during the implementation of development and humanitarian projects by teams in local NGOs.

4.2.2 Sources of Funding and Distributed Leadership

The study found that the most common sources of funding for Find Your Feet included: 52.4% Multilateral funding, 38.1% international organizations, and other sources of project funding, which referred to the government, constituted 9.5% (Figure 8). Multilateral agencies are aid institutions

formed by multiple governments that pool resources and mutually govern development assistance; international foundations(including charities and foundations) are private entities that make grants to NGOs and CBOs, [98]. A review of Annual Return forms submitted to the Non-Governmental Organisation Board showed that during the period of interest (2016-2021), projects were mainly funded by the following institutions: The Development Fund of Norway, May Foundation, Kindernoltithe, World Food Programme, Government of Malawi, and Tilitonse Foundation

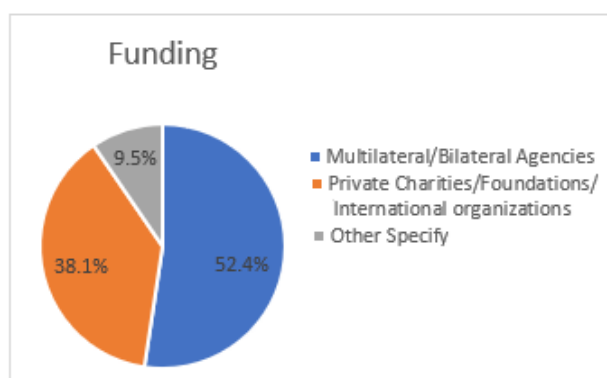


Fig. 9: Sources of Project Funding

Except for envisioning leadership tasks in government-funded projects where junior managers' involvement was 67% and in organizing leadership tasks where involvement of senior management constituted 19% (8 of 42 responses) for multilateral funded projects, 33% (2 of 6 responses) for Government, and 21% (6 of 28) for private charities/international funding organization, Senior Management followed by junior managers dominated on all leadership tasks across funding sources (Table 4). The multilateral-funded projects, however, showed increased involvement of field officers (14, 33%) and project officers (18, 43%) in organizing leadership tasks. Projects funded by private charities also showed similar trends of responses for involvement in organizing leadership tasks for field officers (10, 36%) and project officers (12, 43%).

The study compared the mean number of management groups involved in the four distributed leadership roles across the level of success and the three funding sources, namely, private charities, multilateral agencies, and the Government. It found successful multilateral financed projects involved at least 2.3, 2.3, 1.9, and 1.8 levels of organization for envisioning, social spanning, organizing, and social leadership respectively, whereas the least successful projects 2.3, 2, 1.5, and 1.5 for the same leadership roles (Figure 9).

Government-funded projects presented a mixed bag for involvement across leadership roles, despite consistency in scores of 1 for social leadership and 2 for external spanning across both successful and least successful projects.

Table 4. Involvement in Leadership Across Funding Sources

Row Labels	Multilateral Agencies		Government		Private Charities		Total Responses		Total %
	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	Responses	%	
Envisioning	54	29%	6	25%	26	24%	86	26.88%	
Donor/Other External Agents	4	7%		0%	2	8%	6	6.98%	
Field Officers	14	26%		0%		0%	14	16.28%	
Middle Managers - Project	18	33%	4	67%	10	38%	32	37.21%	
Coordinator /MEAL									
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	18	33%	2	33%	14	54%	34	39.53%	
Organizing	42	23%	6	25%	28	25%	76	23.75%	
Donor/Other External Agents	2	5%		0%		0%	2	2.63%	
Field Officers	14	33%	2	33%	10	36%	26	34.21%	
Middle Managers - Project	18	43%	2	33%	12	43%	32	42.11%	
Coordinator /MEAL									
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	8	19%	2	33%	6	21%	16	21.05%	
Social Leadership	40	22%	4	17%	26	24%	70	21.88%	
Board Level Agents		0%		0%	2	8%	2	2.86%	
Donor/Other External Agents	2	5%		0%		0%	2	2.86%	
Field Officers	12	30%		0%	4	15%	16	22.86%	
Middle Managers - Project	12	30%		0%	6	23%	18	25.71%	
Coordinator /MEAL									
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	14	35%	4	100%	14	54%	32	45.71%	
Spanning	50	27%	8	33%	30	27%	88	27.50%	
Donor/Other External Agents	6	12%	2	25%	4	13%	12	13.64%	
Field Officers	10	20%		0%	8	27%	18	20.45%	
Middle Managers - Project	14	28%	2	25%	8	27%	24	27.27%	
Coordinator /MEAL									
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	20	40%	4	50%	10	33%	34	38.64%	
Grand Total	186	100%	24	100%	110	100%	320	100.00%	

Unsuccessful government-funded scored an average of up to 2 for envisioning leadership whereas successful ones scored 1.5. On the other hand, successful government projects had better scores for organizing (1.5) compared to 1 for unsuccessful projects.

The study compared the mean number of management groups involved in the four distributed leadership roles across the level of success and the three funding sources, namely, private charities, multilateral agencies, and the Government. It found successful multilateral financed projects involved at least 2.3, 2.3, 1.9, and 1.8 levels of organization for envisioning, social spanning, organizing, and social leadership respectively, whereas the least successful projects 2.3, 2, 1.5, and 1.5 for the same leadership roles (Figure 10).

Government-funded projects presented a mixed bag for involvement across leadership roles, despite consistency in scores of 1 for social leadership and 2 for external spanning across both successful and least successful projects. Unsuccessful government-funded scored an average of up to 2 for envisioning leadership whereas successful ones scored 1.5. On the other hand, successful government projects had better scores for organizing (1.5) compared to 1 for unsuccessful projects.

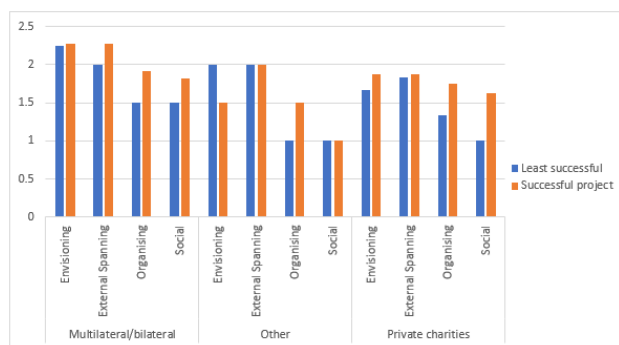


Fig. 10: DL Roles and Type of Funding Agency

Last, successful projects funded by charities scored highly on all aspects of leadership, with 1.9 for Envisioning, 1.9 for external spanning, 1.8 for organizing, and 1.6 for social leadership, whereas unsuccessful projects 1.6, 1.8, 1.3, and 1 in the respective aspects.

4.2.3 Implementation of Partnerships and Distributed Leadership Roles

Up to 86% of the respondents had implemented projects in consortia and 29% had implemented projects under one institution (Table 5). In consortia, there are partnerships towards the design and delivery of interventions among two or more NGOs unlike projects designed and implemented under one institution, [99]. Among others, institutions to have jointly implemented various projects with Find Your Feet are the African Institute of Corporate Citizenship (AICC), Network for Youth and Development (NFYD), Malawi Union of Savings and Credit Cooperatives (MUSCO), Voice of Livingstonia, and Church and Society Programme (CSP). The study found active involvement of middle managers (18, 38%) and field officers (16, 33%) in organizing leadership tasks than for both senior managers (12, 25%) and other external agents (2, 4%) in consortia projects (Table 6). Similarly in projects implemented by single institutions organizing leadership was exclusive to middle managers (8, 57%) and field officers (6, 43%).

Like findings on funding source and hierarchy, senior management dominated spanning (20, 37%), social (18, 41%), and envisioning (20, 38%) leadership tasks in consortium projects. Single-institution projects also had similar findings, with senior management dominating spanning (4, 33%), social (6, 43%), and envisioning (6, 50%) leadership. On the contrary in single-institution projects field officers (4, 29%) were second most involved in social leadership than middle managers.

Table 5. Project Implementation Partnership Approaches

Project Implementation Approach	Consortium	Responses		Percent of Cases
		N	Percent	
Project Implementation Approach	Consortium	2	75.0%	85.7%
	Single Institution	8	25.0%	28.6%
Total		3	100.0%	114.3%

a. Dichotomy group tabulated at value 1.

Table 6. Implementation Approach and Leadership Involvement

Row Labels	Project Implementation Approaches				Total Responses	Total %
	Consortia Responses	%	Single Institution Responses	%		
Envisioning	52	26%	12	23%	64	26%
Donor/Other External Agents	4	8%	0	0%	4	6%
Field Officers	10	19%	2	17%	12	19%
Middle Managers - Project Coordinator/MEAL	18	35%	4	33%	22	34%
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	20	38%	6	50%	26	41%
Organizing	48	24%	14	27%	62	25%
Donor/Other External Agents	2	4%	0	0%	2	3%
Field Officers	16	33%	6	43%	22	35%
Middle Managers - Project Coordinator/MEAL	18	38%	8	57%	26	42%
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	12	25%	0	0%	12	19%
Social	44	22%	14	27%	58	23%
Donor/Other External Agents	2	5%	2	14%	4	7%
Field Officers	10	23%	4	29%	14	24%
Middle Managers - Project Coordinator/MEAL	14	32%	2	14%	16	28%
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	18	41%	6	43%	24	41%
Spanning	54	27%	12	23%	66	26%
Donor/Other External Agents	6	11%	2	17%	8	12%
Field Officers	12	22%	4	33%	16	24%
Middle Managers - Project Coordinator/MEAL	16	30%	2	17%	18	27%
Top Manager - PM, ED, FAM/FM	20	37%	4	33%	24	36%
Grand Total	198	100%	52	100%	250	100%

Further review of the mean number of management groups involved in leadership activities across projects considered successful and least successful, found consistency in envisioning leadership (2.2 in successful projects and 2.1 in the least successful ones) and spanning leadership (2.2 and 2 respectively) where projects were implemented in consortia with other institutions. Despite having more than one level contributing across leadership roles in consortium projects, the least successful projects had slightly lower involvement for organizing (1.6 versus 2 levels of management) and social leadership (1.4 versus 1.8) compared to successful projects (Figure 11). On the other hand, projects implemented in non-consortia arrangements also had consistency in the mean number of management levels involved across external spanning leadership (1.5) and slight differences in envisioning leadership (2 and 1.5) across successful and least successful projects respectively.

However, Organizing and social leadership had pronounced differences in the level of involvement with successful projects involving a rounded average of two (1.75) levels of management each in

leadership roles compared to one level of management.

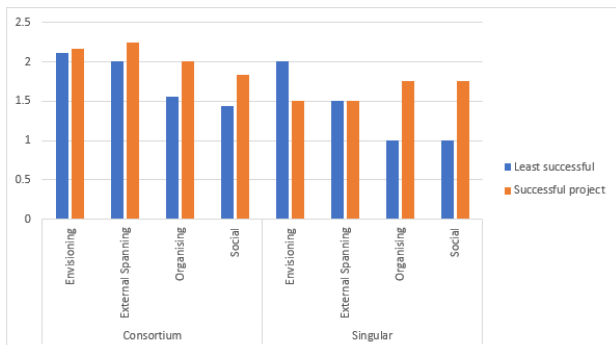


Fig. 11: Involvement in leadership by Implementation Partnership Arrangements

4.3 Project Performance and Distributed Leadership

This sub-section focused on ascertaining how distributed leadership is perceived to influence project performance in local NGOs. This involved identifying what respondents considered to constitute success in projects and measuring perception on the extent to which having multiple leaders influenced outcomes in the project.

4.3.1 What Constitutes Success in NGO Projects?

The study found achieving sustainable change through projects (37%) and meeting key milestones and objectives of the project (37%) as the most considered indicators of project success, with meeting time requirements and meeting cost requirements being the least considered factors (Figure 12). However, there was variability in the way different levels of management evaluated whether a project was successful or not.



Fig. 12: Key Indicators of Project Success

Up to 10 (56%) of the administrative officers considered a project successful if it met its goals and objectives and 8 (44%) of them considered achieving sustainable change as a key indicator of project success. Programme/senior managers also considered these two indicators highly, with 4 (67%) indicating achieving sustainable change as the key indicator and 2(33%) indicating meeting project goals as the key indicator. Unlike wo types of managers, project managers rated four indicators almost equally.

4.3.2 Distributed Leadership and Project Outcomes

Up to 85.7% of the study participants considered having multiple contributors to leadership activities respectively to have a great influence on outcomes, with 64.3% stating important influence and 21.4% very important influence in projects considered successful (Table 7). With few exceptions under livelihood projects, respondents considered distributed leadership to have significantly contributed towards positive project outcomes across sectors (71% in livelihood projects, and 100% in Water and sanitation, governance, health and nutrition, and public works sectors of project focus respectively).

Table 7. Influence of Distributed Leadership on Project Outcomes by Sector

To what extent did having different individuals contributing to leadership influence outcomes of the project in Successful projects						
Sector of Project Focus		Limited Influence	Moderate Influence	Important Influence	Very Important Influence	Total
Livelihood	Count	2	2	10	0	14
	% within Sector of Project Focus	14.3%	14.3%	71.4%	0.0%	100.0%
WASH	Count	0	0	4	2	6
	% within Sector of Project Focus	0.0%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%	100.0%
Governance	Count	0	0	2	2	4
	% within Sector of Project Focus	0.0%	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	100.0%
Health and Nutrition	Count	0	0	0	2	2
	% within Sector of Project Focus	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Public Works	Count	0	0	2	0	2
	% within Sector of Project Focus	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	2	2	18	6	28
	% within Sector of Project Focus	7.1%	7.1%	64.3%	21.4%	100.0%

5 Conclusions and Future Research

This study sought to ascertain the occurrence of distributed leadership in projects implemented by a local non-governmental organization. It explored distributed leadership through the performance of leadership tasks following the classification of distributed team leadership roles identified by [1] namely envisioning, organizing, spanning, and social leadership. It found non-profit projects to involve more than formally appointed leaders in leadership activities including field officers and agents external to the institution, apart from executive or senior-level managers and middle or

junior-level managers. This contrasts with earlier studies, including Inglis (2017), which found distributed leadership to only occur at senior/executive management level and not all other levels in Australian Non-Profits, where each leader directed activities in line with their respective areas of responsibility.

The study also found the performance of leadership tasks in projects to be strongly influenced by organizational structure rather than funding agency and implementation of projects using consortiums. Senior-level managers followed by middle managers were found to be more involved in leadership tasks of projects than field or administrative level officers and other external agents. Comparison of the mean number of management groups involved in leadership tasks across projects considered successful and least successful ones, found successful projects to have more levels of management groups taking an active role in leadership tasks than unsuccessful projects. The study, however, found a significantly negative correlation between the level of the management of a respondent and the average number of management groups involved in leadership tasks for the most successful projects and least successful ones. This explains the findings of earlier studies, [25], [47], [48] of distributed leadership in NGOs as characteristic of senior management due to their targeting of executive managers as study participants. Further, the findings implied that the centralization of leadership activities to one or a few management groups had a negative effect on project performance.

Further, except for projects funded by multinational organizations, and private charities which showed increased involvement of junior managers and field officers in organizing leadership activities than senior managers, the study found the type of funding institution not to affect overall trends in involvement across levels management. Projects funded by the government of Malawi, however, had the lowest level of involvement in social leadership to one management group compared to the other funding agencies. Analysis of partnership project implementation arrangements also found similar results for increased involvement of junior managers and field officers in organizing leadership for consortium projects whereas projects implemented by single institutions found exclusivity in organizing leadership for junior managers and field officers. Projects implemented under one institution also showed greater involvement of field officers in social leadership than junior managers. This contrasts with [99] who found that consortia

implementation required more efforts toward resolving incompatible organizational strategies, conflicts, and disputes, as well as the increased workload for support functions and the need to institutionalize business process. The findings highlight relationships between the level of success achieved in a project and the involvement of junior managers and field officers in organizing and social leadership roles.

The study found great variability in the perception of the influence of distributed leadership in both successful and least successful projects towards project outcomes across sectors of implementation. However, its influence was perceived highly in projects regarded as successful, unlike unsuccessful ones where there was variability with most considering its influence as non-existent. Considering the finding above, where organizational hierarchy was found to influence involvement in leadership activities in non-profit projects and the relation between average groups of management involved in projects and project performance, the study recommends the adoption of hybrid forms of distributed leadership to achieve effectiveness in NGO projects.

The findings of the study on the occurrence of distributed leadership in non-profit projects diverge from those of similar studies conducted in the Western context. It is therefore recommended to explore distributed leadership in different cultural settings to ascertain the influence of culture on the involvement of different management groups in leadership tasks.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The authors wrote, reviewed and edited the content as needed and they have not utilised artificial intelligence (AI) tools. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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