

The role of leadership in promoting sustainable growth initiatives across Africa: A conceptual discussion

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Abstract: Africa stands at a precarious intersection where the desperate need for socio-economic development crashes head-on with the harsh reality of climate vulnerability. While the continent contributes a negligible amount to the global emissions crisis, it is nevertheless disproportionately affected by the effects of climate change resulting in threats to food security and basic survival. This paper argues that the solution is not merely technical but fundamentally human. The solution is about leadership; but not the old-school, command-and-control variety which often fails in these volatile settings. Instead, the paper advocates for a more fluid, adaptive architecture of power to navigate the complex socio-political landscape of most African nations. By synthesising theories on green growth and environmental governance, the discussion highlights that effective stewardship requires a complete departure from increasing bureaucracy. True sustainability leaders in Africa are those who can seamlessly blend modern scientific frameworks with Indigenous knowledge systems; balancing urgent economic needs with long-term ecological integrity. Whether it is managing renewable energy transitions in Morocco or decentralising wetland management in Uganda, the evidence suggests that success relies on ‘systemic thinking’ and the ability to build coalitions across fractured sectors. The analysis further reveals that context is everything. What works in a resource-rich environment might fail in a resource-scarce one. As such, leaders must pivot from being simple administrators to being ‘institutional entrepreneurs’ who can seize fleeting policy windows to enact permanent change. Ultimately, for Africa to secure a livable future, it must cultivate transformative leaders capable of harmonising the vertical integration of global policy with the horizontal integration of local community needs.

Keywords: Adaptive Management, Green Growth, Environmental Leadership, Leadership, Sustainable Development.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, Africa has witnessed a significant surge in the demand for sustainable development and green growth, driven by rapid urbanisation, population growth, and heightened exposure to climate change impacts (Chuku & Ajayi, 2022). The quality of leadership in sustainability projects has become a key factor in the continent's progress towards environmentally sustainable development paths given its growing environmental issues and urgent socioeconomic development needs (Adeyeye, Adeyemi & Collins, 2019). The foundation of Africa's sustainability goals is leadership, or the capacity to see, affect, and inspire group action towards shared objectives (Musango, Currie & Robinson, 2020).

Though much study has concentrated on the technical elements of sustainability transitions, the leadership traits required for efficient environmental governance in African settings still lack theory (Okereke & Coventry, 2021). This theoretical gap is important since the effective implementation of sustainability frameworks depends on the capacity of leaders to control complex socio-political settings, strike competing interests, and start institutional transformation (Hickmann & Stehle, 2019).

Africa's unique position at the crossroads of developmental goals and environmental concerns emphasises the significance of this discourse (UNEP, 2023). Though its past contributions to worldwide emissions are minimal, the continent is disproportionately impacted by climate change (Nemashakwe, 2024; Sy, 2016). As such, leadership

that can advance climate justice while supporting local sustainability projects is crucial (Adenle, Rae & Sonwa, 2020). Moreover, Africa's development route has a major impact on worldwide sustainability outcomes; therefore, understanding the leadership elements that support proper environmental management – which is of worldwide relevance – is vital (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2019).

This conceptual paper discusses the importance of leadership in promoting sustainable development and green growth in Africa. The whole world has made tackling climate change a top priority because without fast action, disastrous effects are unavoidable. As such, Africa - one of the most severely impacted regions despite its negligible contribution to world emissions - faces difficulties in food security, water resources, and public health (Raimi, Vivien & Oluwatoyin, 2021; Tadesse, 2010). The paper is structured as follows: Following the introduction section, conceptual foundations of sustainability leadership in Africa are discussed. This will be followed by leadership qualities for effective sustainability outcomes. The fourth part of the discussion looks at institutional aspects of sustainability leadership. This will be followed by leadership strategies in various contextual settings. The paper concludes by presenting conceptual dimensions of sustainability leadership.

2. Conceptual foundations of sustainability leadership in Africa

2.1 Environmental leadership

Environmental leadership is a multidimensional concept which includes the abilities, methods, and qualities that allow people and organisations to spark change towards environmental sustainability goals. Modern studies on environmental leadership have developed from conventional leadership theory to include various aspects relevant to sustainability settings (Redekop & Olson, 2019). Schein (2019) defined environmental leadership as including three interrelated aspects namely technical knowledge in environmental science and management, political savvy in negotiating complicated stakeholder landscapes, and ethical orientation towards intergenerational equity and ecological integrity. A valuable heuristic for assessing leadership effectiveness in sustainability settings, this three-part paradigm acknowledges that technical knowledge by itself is inadequate without related competencies in stakeholder involvement and normative commitment to environmental principles.

Building on this basis, Mtutu & Thondhlana (2020) suggested that in African settings, good environmental leadership requires more skills in cultural navigation, awareness of indigenous knowledge systems, and the ability to balance urgent development needs with long-term sustainability goals. Their study in Southern African communities showed that leaders who effectively combine modern sustainability frameworks with traditional ecological knowledge produce better lasting environmental effects.

2.2 Sustainable development governance leadership

Sustainable development governance includes the institutional structures, policy frameworks, and decision-making procedures whereby sustainability goals are created and conducted. Leadership in this field functions at several levels – from international diplomacy to national policy development to local execution – with each level needing unique leadership qualities (Van der Heijden et al., 2019). African leadership in global environmental governance at the international level has shown growing assertiveness in climate discussions, biodiversity conservation frameworks, and sustainable development agenda-setting (Biedenkopf et al., 2021). Research by Okereke & Coventry (2021) found diplomatic coalition-building, narrative framing, and technical capacity mobilisation to be important leadership tools by which African representatives have affected world environmental governance systems despite power imbalances in international relations. Sustainable leadership should not only look at one aspect but endeavour to strike a balance between people, money and the environment (Chinongwa & Nemashakwe, 2025).

Transformational leadership theory provides relevant analysis at national level on how visionary leaders drive institutional innovation in environmental governance. Hickmann and Stehle (2019) record how certain African countries have created innovative institutional structures for sustainability by means of leadership defined by explicit expression of sustainability visions, institutional entrepreneurship, and strategic use of international alliances. Their comparison of Rwanda's environmental governance changes shows how leadership dedication turned into institutional capacity development, regulatory creativity, and efficient policy execution.

Alongside these viewpoints, complexity leadership theory shows how leadership develops and operates within the complex adaptive systems typical of sustainable development issues (Nkomo et al., 2019). This theoretical lens emphasises distributed leadership, adaptive governance, and emergent strategy as essential elements for navigating sustainability transitions amidst uncertainty and interdependence. Empirical research by Musango et al. (2020) in East African renewable energy transitions validates this approach, demonstrating how leadership networks rather than individual leaders effectively navigated socio-technical complexity.

2.3 Green growth leadership in African settings

Conceptualised as economic development that concurrently promotes environmental sustainability, green growth has become a major policy paradigm across Africa (Schandl et al., 2018). Leading green growth projects calls for unique abilities to spot synergies between environmental stewardship and economic development, organise funding in green industries, and create policy tools motivating sustainable economic activity.

Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2019) defined political commitment, institutional coordination, technical capacity, and stakeholder involvement as basic leadership qualities in effective green growth projects. Their comparison of green growth plans in Ghana, Morocco, and Rwanda shows how well leaders can match environmental goals with national development aims and drive cross-sectoral cooperation. Building on this study, Adeyeye et al. (2019) underlined the importance of “policy entrepreneurs” who support green growth projects by means of strategic framing, coalition building, and opportunity exploitation. Their study in Nigeria's renewable energy sector showed how individual leaders carefully negotiated institutional complexity to promote solar energy adoption despite established interests in traditional energy systems.

2.4 Community-based environmental management leadership

In African settings where centralised government capabilities may be limited, community-based methods of environmental management have shown exceptional success (Stone & Nyaupane, 2018). Leadership in such projects shows unique traits from conventional institutional leadership, stressing facilitation, knowledge integration, and community mobilisation. Musavengane & Siakwah (2020)'s study of community conservation projects in Southern Africa found trust-building, conflict mediation, and cultural legitimacy as vital leadership qualities in community-based sustainability projects. Their results imply that leaders who deftly bridge modern environmental governance systems with conventional authority structures produce more sustainable results than those who work only within one sphere. In addition, sustainability leadership should also include climate change mitigation and adaptation plans. Creative leaders are pushing the shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources as a vital step to safeguard Africa's developmental and environmental future (Nemashakwe, 2024; Moleka, 2023; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2022).

3. Leadership qualities for effective sustainability outcomes

A study of different case studies across Africa uncovers recurring patterns of leadership qualities linked to effective sustainability results. Though their relative importance changes depending on the setting, these qualities show up throughout governance settings and hierarchical levels.

3.1 Strategic foresight and vision articulation

A basic quality seen in many successful projects is the leader's ability to express convincing sustainability vision and convert intangible ideas into practical plans. Leadership from the Rwanda Environment Management Authority in Rwanda's Green Growth and Climate Resilience Strategy showed a remarkable ability to express a consistent long-term goal while creating gradual implementation paths (Ntakirutimana & Uwase, 2022). By creating obvious links between near-term activities and long-term sustainability goals, this strategic foresight helped to unite stakeholders and mobilise resources.

Morocco's leadership in renewable energy development demonstrates how strategic vision can drive transformational change. By emphasising renewable energy as a foundation for national economic development, global impact, and environmental responsibility, the country has moved beyond basic technical energy planning

(IRENA, 2018). The Noor Ouarzazate Solar Complex, one of the largest solar power plants in the world, exemplifies Morocco's commitment to decarbonisation and innovation (World Bank, 2019). These initiatives boost Morocco's environmental stewardship such that by 2030, 52% of the energy mix is expected to come from renewable energy (World Bank, 2019). Moreover, considering Africa's extreme vulnerability to climate change, leaders have to show great dedication to climate action by supporting adaptation strategies, using sustainable water management techniques, and investing in renewable energy projects to reduce adverse environmental impacts (Nemashakwe, 2024; Tadesse, 2010).

3.2 Systemic thinking and integration capability

The ability of the leader to see sustainability challenges as interconnected systems rather than isolated problems consistently correlates with implementation effectiveness. Ghana's Cocoa Forest REDD+ Programme shows how leaders with systematic thinking skills effectively combined agricultural production, forest conservation, and rural livelihoods that had been managed through fragmented interventions before. (Asare et al., 2024). In order to succeed, it is important that leaders possess integration capacity. Integration capacity emphasises institutional coordination and leadership to bring together scattered ministerial duties beyond conceptual knowledge. In Kenya, the efficient leadership behind the Climate Smart Agriculture Strategy (KCSAS) has promoted cross-sector cooperation, hence improving agricultural resilience and reducing climate effects. This strategy has also allowed counties to create context-specific activities, hence guaranteeing sustainable resource distribution (Government of Kenya, 2017).

3.3 Learning orientation and adaptive management

Sustainability projects are run in settings marked by complexity, ambiguity, and dynamic evolution, requiring adaptive leadership strategies (Davies, 2019). Leaders who are able to track execution plans and change plans accordingly have shown better success in reaching sustainability goals (Thompson, 2021). In a study conducted by Namibia's Ministry of Environment, Forestry and Tourism in collaboration with the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations, leadership was found to be very important in promoting sustainable resource management (MEFT, 2023). It was also shown that regular assessments and strong monitoring systems helped the programme to continuously enhance conservation incentives, governance and capacity-building. Its success is clear in empowering local communities through conservancies, which give user rights over animals and other natural resources. Run by elected committees, these conservancies have improved animal conservation and created economic prospects such as community development initiatives, tourist income, and job possibilities. With recent studies pointing to its growth to span over 20% of Namibia's land area and assist more than 190,000 people, Namibia's CBNRM programme still serves as an example of integrating ecological sustainability with socioeconomic development (MEFT, 2023).

3.4 Coalition building

Effective sustainability leadership is not just about policy but it is about people. It means uniting different industries by harmonising their diverse perspectives and interests. Given the inherently cross-sectoral nature of sustainability concerns, leadership efficacy relates closely to the capacity to promote cooperative networks instead of operating inside institutional silos (Asare et al., 2024). Leadership that fostered good cooperation among social protection, agricultural development, and climate adaptation stakeholders helped Ethiopia's Productive Safety Net Programme to successfully include climate resilience elements (Belete et al., 2022). This coalition-building went beyond simple consultation to create real co-creation processes where various knowledge guided programme design and execution.

3.5 Resource mobilisation and allocation

Effective sustainability leadership includes unique capacity to mobilise and effectively distribute financial, technical, and human resources to further sustainability goals (Thompson, 2021). This goes beyond obtaining money to cover strategic resource deployment to spark systematic change instead of just sponsoring discrete initiatives. Innovative funding solutions under Tunisia's Sustainable Cities Initiative showed leadership expertise in resource mobilisation (Dhifi et al., 2023). To support urban sustainability initiatives, leaders established municipal

green bonds, fostered public-private partnerships, and connected national and international financial sources. More importantly, leaders utilised these tools effectively to maximise further investment. Public funds were thoughtfully allocated to mitigate risks associated with private investment in sustainable infrastructure (Dhifi et al., 2023).

4. Institutional aspects of sustainability leadership

Analysis of the extant literature showed that institutional settings significantly mediate the efficacy of leaders. At the same time, it also showed how strong leaders change institutional structures to facilitate sustainable changes.

4.1 Institutional entrepreneurship

Leaders who effectively promoted sustainability projects often showed remarkable skills in institutional entrepreneurship – designing new institutional structures, reusing current institutions, or reorganising institutional relationships to support sustainability goals (Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum, 2009). Rwanda's changes in environmental governance reflect this aspect as leaders established new institutional frameworks like the Rwanda Green Fund (FONERWA) while simultaneously overhauling existing agencies to integrate sustainability goals across government operations (Ntakirutimana & Uwase, 2022).

4.2 Coherence and policy integration

The ability to promote policy integration across historically compartmentalised areas determines much of the efficacy of leaders in promoting sustainable development (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Analysis of the extant literature revealed that effective sustainability leaders regularly showed expertise in balancing environmental regulations with economic development frameworks, social welfare goals, and sectoral plans (Sachs, 2015). Institutionally, this integration is shown through coordinated efforts, cross-sectoral committees, and integrated planning tools (ibid).

In Senegal, the National Committee for Sustainable Development, a committee which crosses conventional ministry boundaries, has been shown to provide policy continuity. This is clearly articulated by Diagne & Mbaye (2023, p. 222) who claimed that “the establishment of this committee was a turning institutional innovation, meant with enough power and a cross-sectoral mandate to mediate policy disputes and guarantee integration across ministries”. By means of resource allocation optimisation, this decline in policy disputes has greatly enhanced implementation efficacy.

4.3 Knowledge management institutionalised

According to Hargreaves & Fink (2006), good leaders establish solid systems for recording and spreading knowledge, creating an institutional memory that outlasts their own time in office. In environments characterised by frequent leadership transitions or governance instability, this institutional characteristic assumes special significance. By creating the Nile Research Institute as a boundary organisation between scientific information generation and policy execution, Egypt's sustainable water management projects showed outstanding institutionalised knowledge management (Abdel-Gawad & El-Nashar, 2022). Ministerial reorganisations and political transitions do not affect evidence-based policy execution under this institutional structure.

4.4 Horizontal and vertical integration

Good sustainability governance calls for cooperation across vertical dimensions (international to local) and horizontal dimensions (across sectors and stakeholder groups) (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Studies show that effective projects are defined by leaders who create institutional systems enabling simultaneous integration of both dimensions (Sachs, 2015). Uganda's decentralised wetland management system exemplifies this dual integration through institutional design that simultaneously devolves authority to district-level governance while preserving coherent national standards and creating cross-sectoral coordination platforms at every governance level (Namujju et al., 2022). This institutional framework preserves conceptual coherence while allowing context-specific execution.

5. Leadership strategies in various contextual settings

An analysis of the existing literature uncovers unique trends in leadership styles used in different contextual settings. These trends imply that contextual fit, not the universal application of uniform leadership paradigms, determines the efficacy of leaders.

5.1 Resource constrained settings

Successful leadership strategies in settings marked by great resource limits highlight creative adaptation, smart prioritisation, and efficient resource use (Fletcher, 2017). Through strategies that stressed using current agricultural extension networks, giving interventions with several co-benefits top priority, and sequential implementation aimed at high-impact possibilities, Malawi's Climate-Smart Agriculture programme showed efficient leadership under resource limits (Chinsinga & Matita, 2021). Unlike less successful initiatives in comparable environments that tried entire implementation with limited resources, this leadership approach stresses strategic execution. Strategic interventions in resource-constrained settings emphasise high-impact projects to guarantee optimal efficiency with fewer resources. Fletcher (2017, p. 187) indicates that “in resource-scarce settings, good leadership means finding interventions that use current capacities and produce sustainable outcomes instead of spreading efforts thinly across many projects”. This strategy emphasises the need for prioritisation and smart resource allocation for desired results.

5.2 Political transition settings

Sustainability projects conducted during times of political transition have unique difficulties, which include policy continuity, institutional stability, and stakeholder uncertainty (Fletcher, 2017). In such situations, effective leadership strategies highlight institutional anchoring, stakeholder ownership distribution, and strategic framing that crosses political boundaries. Tunisia's renewable energy projects after the Arab Spring showed effective leadership adaptation to political transition by means of strategies that spread programme ownership among several stakeholders – including civil society groups, international partners, and local governments – thereby generating implementation resilience despite ministerial instability (Dhifi et al., 2023). Furthermore, politicians tactically presented renewable energy as promoting several political goals like energy sovereignty, economic growth, and environmental responsibility, therefore fostering cross-partisan backing.

5.3 Dispersed government settings

Many case studies were set in governance settings marked by institutional fragmentation, jurisdictional uncertainty, or regional autonomy arrangements. Leadership techniques proving successful in such settings stress boundary-spanning roles, phased implementation plans, and incentive alignment across governance organisations (Akande et al., 2022). Nigeria's Great Green Wall project demonstrated that leadership can succeed even within a fractured governance system. According to Akande et al. (2022), the key was striking a balance by establishing clear rules for how federal and state levels collaborate, while giving states the freedom to adapt the project to their own local realities. More crucially, leaders were expected to create incentive systems matching federal goals with state-level political concerns so that they can motivate implementation across all levels of government. Strategic incentive alignment was more successful than command tactics, producing conformity in appearance but not substance.

6. Transformative leadership in sustainability transitions

Transformative leadership in sustainability transitions is about rethinking system-wide change rather than accepting gradual changes. This conceptual paper describes transformative leadership as the capacity to question accepted paradigms, foster innovation in specific niches, and strategically grab new possibilities. These strategies taken together allow the combination of environmental, economic, and social goals, hence opening the path for daring and flexible government.

6.1 Paradigm shifting

Transformative sustainable leadership demonstrates a notable capacity to challenge dominant beliefs that hinder sustainability transitions and articulate alternative conceptual frameworks (Gasore & Ndahiro, 2022). Morocco's leadership in renewable energy positions its growth as an economic opportunity rather than an environmental obligation, effectively recontextualising the nation's reliance on fossil fuels from an economic need to a strategic vulnerability (El Mouden & Aziki, 2022). This paradigmatic reframing profoundly changed the decision-making calculus across government agencies and business sector actors, hence enabling bold policy promises and implementation acceleration that would have stayed politically impossible under prior conceptual frameworks.

6.2 Strategic niche management

Transformative leadership often involves strategic niche management by creating safe environments that enable innovation before it is widely implemented, hence promoting transformation (Maina et al., 2021). For example, Rwanda's e-mobility initiative demonstrates this approach as leaders built dedicated innovation zones with legislative freedom, focused incentives, and required infrastructure support to establish electric transportation solutions appropriate for African contexts (Gasore & Ndahiro, 2022). Unlike less successful projects that sought immediate full-scale implementation without sufficiently adapted models, this strategic niche cultivation let the development of context-appropriate technologies, business models, and operational systems precede system-wide changes.

6.3 Exploitation of strategic opportunities

Transformative leadership shows an extraordinary capacity to identify and seize strategic chances for system-wide transformation during important policy windows or times of great upheaval. A good illustration is Kenya's total prohibition on single-use plastics. Officials used growing public worry about marine plastic pollution to push major policy changes during a period of increased environmental consciousness (Maina et al., 2021). What separates transformative leaders from the rest is their ability to seize the moment. When a brief window of opportunity opens, they do not let it slip away; instead, they mobilise quickly, coordinate with others, and shape the narrative to turn temporary public attention into permanent policy change.

7. Conceptual dimensions of sustainability leadership

7.1 Cross-case patterns in leadership efficacy

An analysis of the extant literature reveals consistent trends in leadership traits linked to implementation efficacy (Boeske, 2023). These trends imply basic leadership qualities that always help sustainability advancement regardless of environmental issues or government settings, since they cross context boundaries (Gronn, 2002). Statistical studies show a close link between implementation efficacy and leadership traits like visionary capacity, stakeholder involvement competence, and adaptive management orientation (Gronn, 2002). In resource-constrained environments, resource mobilisation capacity shows the greatest link while in cross-sectoral initiatives, integration capacity shows a particularly significant relationship with implementation efficiency (Boeske, 2023). Formal authority positions have a notably lower relationship with implementation effectiveness, suggesting that those without hierarchical status may contribute more to sustainability leadership (Gronn, 2002). This is especially significant in team settings crossing organisational and sectoral borders since it fits theories of distributed leadership stressing leadership as a function rather than a role (Boeske, 2023).

7.2 Leadership effectiveness contextual contingencies

Despite the cross-case trends noted above, comparative analysis showed notable contextual dependencies influencing the link between leadership strategies and sustainability results. These contingencies imply the need for context-tailored leadership development instead of universal leadership models. In settings marked by strong bureaucratic customs such as Morocco and Egypt, leadership performance was closely tied to procedural legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and institutional entrepreneurial capacity (Battilana, Leca & Boxenbaum, 2009). On the other hand, in settings with strong community-based governance customs such as Namibia and Kenya, leadership legitimacy came mostly from participatory processes and inclusive decision-making (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Another important contingency element is resource availability. Leadership effectiveness in highly resource-abundant projects such as Morocco's renewable energy investments strongly corresponded with strategic resource allocation and scaling capacity (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). On the other hand, in very resource-constrained settings such as Malawi's climate-smart agriculture programme, effectiveness was more closely tied to creative capacity. Furthermore, contemporary studies now highlight how strong climate change plans are linked to good sustainability leadership in Africa. Leaders are supposed to create and carry out policies that not only react to resource limits and bureaucratic traditions but also proactively tackle the climate issue by promoting innovations in renewable technologies and adaptive practices (Nemashakwe, 2024; Tadesse, 2010).

8. Concluding remarks

Examining leadership in African sustainability projects shows that good leadership transcends conventional hierarchical structures. Leaders who mix technical sustainability knowledge with a systems-oriented viewpoint and adaptive management abilities promote progress. They make it obvious that increasing environmental governance depends on context-sensitive strategies. Often centred on personal charm and fixed skills, conventional leadership development models fall short in addressing the dynamic demands of sustainable development. Rather, the paper advocates for initiatives stressing boundary-spanning competencies, participatory decision-making, and action-learning approaches, so as to equip leaders to negotiate several institutional and resource settings.

This conceptual discussion has emphasised the contextual nature of sustainable leadership. The interaction between institutional structures and leadership illustrates that genuine change is not the result of formal authority alone, but rather of distributed networks and adaptive strategies that are aligned with the socio-political and resource realities of the local area. In the context of escalating climate change challenges, Africa must adopt leadership models that prioritise both mitigation and adaptation, ensuring that visionary leaders drive forward the transition to renewable energy and sustainable resource management to secure long-term economic and environmental stability (Nemashakwe, 2024; Moleka, 2023; Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2022).

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