

DETERMINANTS OF CIVIC LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA:
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF NGDOs IN KENYA

A SEARCH FOR RELEVANT THEORY

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Abstract

Effective leadership is a significant factor in all forms of successful joint human endeavour. This paper poses and provides preliminary answers to the question: what factors give rise to successful leadership of nongovernmental development organisations in Kenya? By developing and testing a dedicated survey and case study methods, five co-determinants for successful leadership are identified and explained. The investigation is then located within a wider framework of enquiry about concepts that can best be employed to understand civil society and civic leadership in Africa, pointing towards the application of theories associated with complexity, emergence and social identity.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

Across the world, the quality of leaders is recognised as a vital element for the effective performance in joint human endeavours of all kinds and at all scales. For example, inadequate leadership is cited as a significant factor contributing to the poor development achievement and enduring conflicts in much of sub-Saharan Africa, requiring special remedial initiatives (Mwaipaya, 1980).³ Good leadership is also typically cited as a critical factor in making and keeping businesses viable (e.g., Bennis, 1994). However, current study, understanding and theorizing about leadership exhibits a number of critical biases. Such shortcomings introduce open and hidden distortions that can, for example, lead to inadequate interpretation of leader behaviour or sub-optimal investment in leadership development or other types of 'capacity-building' support.

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³ The African Leadership Foundation, established in the early nineteen nineties by Nigeria's current president Olesegun Obasanjo, is meant to address the problem of poor leadership on the continent, albeit concentrated on the public sector.

Existing studies of leaders show three common biases. First, the subjects and experiences receiving methodical enquiry are predominantly from within the for-profit, business community and, to a lesser degree, politics and the public sector.⁴ An equivalent attention to substantive and systematic study of civic leaders and leadership is lacking. Second, the location of enquiry is typically the (post-)industrialised countries of Europe, North America and Japan – the North. The developing world – the South – features marginally, if at all, in the evidence employed to advance theory or inform the practice of leadership development. Third, employing both inductive and deductive methods, investigation often operates at two extremes. On one end are high-level generalisations about, for example, a successful leader's desired personal characteristics and behaviours. Typically derived from extensive surveys (e.g., Kouzes and Posner, 1995) this type of analysis is complemented by, and may also draw on, the other extreme of biographical studies of exemplary businessmen, e.g., Bill Gates, (and very occasionally women) as well as renown political figures such as Winston Churchill and Nelson Mandela. One consequence is prevalent leadership theory that either overly relies on reductionism or is excessively personalised and particularistic.

In sum, from a global perspective, current understanding of leaders and leadership is geographically and sectorally skewed, lacks intermediate level analysis and interpretations and, by neglecting civil society as a substantial arena of joint human action, are inadequate and incomplete.⁵ This lacuna is now recognised as an important gap that needs to be filled.

Why is this knowledge gap now seen to be of importance? Mainly because, the past decade has witnessed the growing visibility, size, importance and assertiveness of civil society organisations (CSOs) in national life and development across the world (Salamon, 1994; Mathews, 1997). Today, the phenomenon of nongovernmental organisations (NGDOs) draws the attention of publications like *The Economist* that describe and question their role and legitimacy in influencing local, national and world affairs through both dialogue and protest. Simply put, NGDOs and CSOs are now a recognised force to be reckoned with. They are also a 'sector' that Northern governments and influential aid institutions, such as the World Bank, see as a partial solution to problems of 'right-sizing' the state within an ideology that seeks to privatise public services and redistribute responsibility for well-being in 'partnership' with citizens and businesses. This trend is evident in both donor and aid recipient countries (e.g., Semboja and Therkildsen, 1995). Consequently, understanding CSO behaviour and the contribution of leaders to their stance, role and performance is of increasing significance everywhere. However, our concern is limited to one type of civil society organisation, that is nongovernmental development organisations (NGDOs) founded in developing countries.⁶

The past decade has seen increasing numbers of studies and publications about the NGDO phenomenon and CSOs more widely.⁷ Publications about NGDOs focus on the phenomenon as such (e.g., Smillie, 1995; Sogge, 1995) or analyse country-specific expressions thereof (e.g., Alegre, 1996; Maskay, 1998). Others focus on issues of internal NGDO management and external performance (e.g., Edwards and Hulme, 1992, 1996; Human and Zaaiman, 1995; Kelleher and McLaren, 1996;

⁴ The prominence of study on business leadership is hardly surprising – it is powerful and it pays those who, as academics and advisers, undertake research in this field.

⁵ In this study a distinction is made between the leader as an individual and leadership as embracing organisational governance, typically a combination of the governing board or similar entity with the leader.

⁶ For our purposes, NGDOs will be classed as a sub-set of a far wider set of (formal and informal but institutionalised) voluntary associations between citizens. The NGDOs of concern in this paper are formally constituted, intermediary CSOs dedicated to development, allied to the provision of international aid.

⁷ The comparative non-profit organisations project, initiated by Johns Hopkins University, is an important example of efforts to delineate the whole non-profit 'sector' and demonstrate its size and roles in all countries of the world (e.g., Salamon, *et al.*, 1999). However, this type of study does not adequately embrace civil society *per se*.

Fowler, 1997, 2000c; Suzuki, 1998; Lewis, 2001). While others address NGDO relationships with donors and developing states (e.g., Ndegwa, 1996; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Smillie and Helmich, 1999). Yet others address the future of NGDOs and the challenges they face (e.g., Valderrama, 1997; Lewis and Wallace, 2000; Fowler, 2000a, 2000b).

However, with one noted and recent exception (Smillie and Hailey, 2001) these studies do not focus specifically on NGDO leadership and only one (Lewis, 2001) explicitly locates analysis within a theoretical context. In other words, most studies of NGDOs either neglect leaders and leadership as an important factor or fail to draw on or contribute to theory development. The picture is not substantially different with respect to dedicated study of non-profit leadership in industrialised countries. Most progress in 'gap filling' appears to be located in the USA, a recent example being a national survey by Compasspoint (Peters and Wolfred, 2001). This type of study is shedding necessary light on the people and factors that drive and shape non-profit leadership in the context of an advanced, rich economy containing around a million NPOs. More studies of this sort in (radically) different contexts are a vital step in generating comparative leadership data, second order analysis and theoretical progress.

The investigation described in the following pages therefore seeks to redress a small part of the overall leadership knowledge gap and (eventually) contribute to comparative learning. It does so by describing a test of methods in a preliminary study of NGDO leadership in Kenya that took place between September 2000 and May 2001.

Part 2 below provides a short overview of the current theoretical landscape on leadership. This backdrop is applied, in part 3, to the realm of NGDO leadership and sets out the initial research questions and revisions adopted as the work proceeded. Part 4 details the methodology employed, with major preliminary findings described in part 5. It is important to note that this study must be treated as a work-in-progress. Part 6, presents initial reflections about a theory of NGDO leadership that can be used to understand the determinants of civic leadership in a broader sense. Finally, part 7 describes the type of further, confirmative and theory-oriented study required in and beyond Kenya.

THE THEORETICAL LANDSCAPE

This section reviews the nature of leadership and its implications for NGDOs from inter-related perspectives, beginning with what it means to be a leader in relation to followers. Leadership is further examined in terms of: where leadership is, or should be, located in organisations; the relationship between leadership and context, particularly in relation to culture; differences between leadership and management; the origins of leadership, specifically, can it be nurtured, 'trained' and developed; and gender perspectives, including the gender-balancing role of NGDOs in society and in enhancing the values associated with positive social capital and civility. These perspectives provide the grounding for a definition of leadership in relation to NGDOs. The dimension addressed last is that of leader transition and succession.

Leaders and Followers: looking beyond organisational boundaries

There are almost as many definitions of leadership as they writers about the topic. Their perspectives pivot around: playing particular roles; gathering and intelligently using power; setting a personal example; 'holding' and projecting a valued vision or inspirational agenda; facilitating others to act together and to excel; possessing and applying multiple intelligence; a human quality that simply triggers 'followership'; and communicating the basic rules that make organisations effective (Adair, 1990; Drucker, 1990; Fiedler, 1967; Kouzes and Posner, 1995; Mant, 1997; Grint, 1997; Vaill, 1996).

Two things are implied in them all. First is an ability to awaken self-desired, i.e., not to impose, behaviour in others, the followers. Second is an ability to align and coalesce individual and group behaviour in the direction the organisation requires to be successful.

In relation to the first, much effort has been expended on looking at personality traits and practices that followers' value. The study by Kouzes and Posner (1997) is a classic example. Their research found twenty 'ingredients' of leadership that are admired. The desired combination enables the individual to excel in terms of human relations and inter-personal *transactions*. But, in addition, leaders must also provide a valued purpose, a direction that people want (not have) to move towards. This fulfils a psychological need, part of an invisible contract and relational chemistry. It is a property or quality that transcends overt personal traits because of its deeper psycho-cultural roots (Mant, 1977:23). This 'direction-giving' quality creates what has been referred to as *transformational* leadership (after Burns, 1978).

Alistair Mant (1983, 1997) argues that the notion of multiple intelligence, put forward by Howard Gardner in 1993, is one way of framing what the above aspects of leadership are all about. Gardner posits seven types of intelligence: Linguistic, Logical/mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Bodily/kinaesthetic, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal. This original idea has been bolstered, and the notions of inter- and intra-personal intelligence given a distinct slant, by Daniel Goleman (1996). In *Emotional Intelligence* he asserts that the traditional perspective on intelligence as being logical/mathematical – a question of IQ – is far too narrow. Knowing oneself and relating to others is vital for effective leadership. Expanding on this point, Mant argues that broad-band intelligence -- including personal insight in relating to oneself as well as others -- and a practical understanding of the world -- underpins leaders as artists and artisans of society. These attributes, coupled to an undamaged psychological make up, generate trust and followership around shared, valued goals and ideals.⁸

The dimensions of inspirational guidance and value-based goal setting are particularly important for leadership of organisations like NGDOs that are dedicated to social change. Why? Because followership is not principally reinforced on the basis of economic incentives and market rewards but on a less tangible foundation of cultural, socio-political values, norms and associated aspirations. A leadership study of NGDOs must therefore be concerned about transformational leadership, but with an added twist. The additional complexity is that leaders of NGDOs envisage a direction or goal that requires the development of capacities, relations and values within 'client' communities and local leaders, i.e., leadership outside of the organisation itself.⁹ In other words, we must extend the notion of followership beyond the NGDO into society. And, for this expansion, we must question where leadership lies.

Leaders and Leadership: high or deep?

There are contrasting views of where organisational leadership it is located. The 'pyramid' view locates leadership at the strategic top of the organisation embodied by a single leader or 'top-team' recognised as having this position. This latter variant is not considered a significant feature of NGDO leadership in the South and East – an individual normally has primacy. (A common, sometimes pejorative, observation is that an NGDO is known by the leader, not the organisation as such – it is 'his' or 'her' NGDO. It is personally owned.)

⁸ Broadband intelligence allied to psychological damage can also produce effective leaders, but with malign agendas that also create significant followership. Hitler is but one example.

⁹ Despite the supposedly porous boundaries of corporations, business leadership is typically a quality expressed and researched within. Another limitation of business-led theory.

The 'deep' view sees leadership as a quality distributed throughout the organisation. As limited as it may be, as part of their function everyone has a leadership role to play. In other words, "leadership is a social or collective phenomenon" (Grint, 1997:140). The relevance of this distinction for NGDOs is premised on the proven need – in good development practice -- to empower staff in their work with communities (Fowler, 1997). The *interface between an NGDO and those it serves is, in effect, the nexus between a leader's vision of social or civic reformation and its practical application*. It is vitally important that NGDO staff 'on the periphery' are able to express leadership in their facilitation and nurturing of the local leadership needed to make and retain social capital and civic change. Hence the 'artists' social or civic inspiration must be translated into an organisational design that is both empowering and adaptive.

Leadership in Context

One influential school of thought in leadership and management has been concerned with 'contingency'. That is, the view that appropriate and effective leadership 'depends' in the specifics of the context(s) of operation, as well as on the past experience, the current operating state and future goals of the organisation. Contingency was a reaction to an assertion that there is a best way of leading. The alternative view is that no one 'best' type of leadership exists. What is most effective cannot be determined unless environmental conditioning factors are known (Scott and Meyer, 1994). But this overly reductionist position begs the question of what depends on what to what degree and why? In other words, what are the contingent specifics that apply to NGDOs? A central question addressed in this study.

An important facet of contingency – i.e., acknowledging the influence of a particular time and space -- is leadership in relation to culture. In other words, do cultural norms, conventions, standards, expectations and socially ascribed status have a significant bearing on leadership? Work on culture in relation to business organisations suggests that it does (Hofstede, 1991; Trompenaars, 1993). Drawing on this work in relation to NGDOs suggests, indeed, that 'culture counts' but that the situation is made complex by overlays of culture from different sources: from without, from within and from abroad (Fowler, 1997). This implies that a study of NGDO leadership must be aware about and take readings of the cultural dimensions to leadership, both externally and internally.

Leaders and Managers

In addition to context, studies have grappled with the issue of the difference, if any, between leaders and managers of organisations. Conventional wisdom suggests that they can be differentiated by their primary orientation and tasks (Hudson, 1995:242; Kaplan, 1997). Leaders concern themselves with inspiration, purpose, organisational positioning, strategy and the future. Managers focus on resources, processes, people and getting things done, i.e., the nuts, bolts and daily life of reaching the shared purpose. There are arguments against this implicit separation between thinking and doing. It is essentially divisive and reinforces an old fashioned dichotomy that does adequately reflect the need to integrate both (Lessem in Graham, 1991:xvi).

Studies of NGDOs suggest that if they are internally empowering -- which tends to mean operating with significant delegated authority -- the distinction between the essential features of leaders and managers should not be drawn too sharply (Fowler, 1997). For example, to work across the interface with communities, front-line staff of NGDOs must be able not just to convey the leaders' inspiration, but hold it themselves. They must grasp and articulate the image of a changed situation and society to those, the 'client's, who must similarly aspire to and eventually embody the change. This requirement also applies to relations between managers and staff. In other words, the value-inspired aspect typically ascribed to NGDO leadership must be deep and widely spread. Conceptually, the inspirational dimension of leadership must act as a force field, binding and directing within and beyond the organisation (Wheatley, 1994). Correspondingly, a study of NGDO leaders must pay

attention to how they generate and embed a force field of the image they are pursuing. How do they diffuse the message so that all staff, managers included, have and can express the potential for leadership within them?

Origins of Leadership and the Next Generation: nature and/or nurture?

Up until the nineteen fifties, studies on leadership were dominated by the search for personal traits that singled out leaders from others. This emphasis was premised on the assumption that such characteristics were inborn, innate and hence not amenable to dedicated development or training. Such a view was superseded by research into leader's styles and behaviours. Once these were identified they could be trained for. Associated with contingency theory, the approach to leadership evolved further to examine 'situational leadership'. There was no one, uniform and universal set of leadership characteristics beyond, perhaps, the flexibility or ability of fit into the particular setting and moment.

Current thinking would suggest that the nature/nurture view of leadership and its development is, in fact, a false dichotomy. There may indeed be inherited, innate pre-dispositions -- such as broadband intelligence and intellectual capacity -- that offer greater or lesser potential for leadership. They are not very amenable to development by dedicated action. But there are also many mediating factors in life's experience and formal education that can bring out leadership qualities to a more than sufficient degree from a less strong innate basis. In other words, much is learnable, but a strong intrinsic potential is a definite asset.¹⁰ Peter Senge formulates an answer to the nature-nurture question in the following way.

“The ability of people to be natural leaders is, as near as I can tell, is the by-product of a lifetime of effort – effort to develop conceptual and communication skills, to reflect on personal values and to align personal behaviour with values, to learn how to listen and to appreciate others and others' ideas. In the absence of such effort, personal charisma is style without substance.” (Senge: 1990:359)

The critical issue is, what process of personal 'formation' and re-learning do people undergo from birth that reinforce whatever level of potential leadership capabilities exist, or distort, neglect or suppress them. Making good 'deficiencies' stemming from innate weaknesses and/or experiential blocks is difficult, albeit not impossible with continuous effort.

Consequently, recognising and investing in demonstrated potential is a sensible element of purposeful leadership development. Unfortunately, few NGDOs have well developed schemes to identify and invest in the necessary experiential exposures to their staff: what business would refer to as career planning and development. There are many reasons for this. One is financial. Leadership investment is typically treated as a cost that must be covered by overheads. But, to satisfy funders' expectations, overheads must be kept down. Hence, low or no leadership investment. Coupled to this are uncertainties of organisational continuity stemming from project-based development finance. NGDOs are wary of entering commitments in terms of career development when the future is insecure. Third is attitudinal. People are expected to be capable of doing the job they are hired for and then 'learn by the seat of their pants' as opportunities for personal growth present themselves. In other words, individual leadership capability evolves or it doesn't as the case may be: a form of 'natural selection'. This could be considered the common approach to NGDO leadership. Finally, there is fear of 'poaching'. Lack of adequate investment in NGDO leadership, when set against rapid

¹⁰ A recent analogy sees individual development akin to the art of cooking, rather than the selection and technical bolting together of a set of behaviour-determining genes. Cooking ingredients are a chance-based mix of potentials provided by parents whose subsequent expression depends on the external processes applied to them. It is a complex, subtle story, not reducible to a linear equation.

expansion in the number and size of the NGDO community, is creating a large gap between supply and demand of competent people. The chance is therefore high that your effort will benefit others most. These factors give rise to a perception and experience that leadership development is a high risk, negative sum game, so mitigating against investment.

Overall, therefore, it is not uncommon to find an effective NGDO leader without a strong second cadre or successor generation.¹¹ Inevitably, this is an unwelcome precondition when it comes to leadership transition and organisational regeneration. This study was also designed, therefore, to explore what, if anything, NGDOs individually or collectively are doing about leadership development. What assumptions are they making? What approaches are being adopted? How is risk minimised? What seems to work and why?

Leadership and Gender

Gender aspects of leadership and management are a significant feature of contemporary corporate thinking and practice. A common perception – and complaint – is that women must be better than men to achieve the same status. Furthermore, in organisations women have to play by men’s rules in order to succeed. These, plus negative culture-bound attitudes, create a ‘glass ceiling’ for women as managers and as leaders. As well as an obstacle to upward mobility, there is also evidence that women are not even rewarded for the same work as men at the same organisational level. Yet, outside corporations, the same predisposition towards women having and exerting power is not substantiated (Kanter, 1993:1998). In other words, there is something about corporations that disempower women.

The study of gender and organisations has moved from overt features of numbers, positions and rewards to female employees. Significant as they are as indicators of the problem of male-dominated systems, today more attention is given to deeper lying psychological foundations of organisational behaviour that generate gender-specific dis-empowerment (Coleman, 1991; Tannen, 1996). What can be done about it is also being explored in the development context (Moser, 1993; Rao and Kelleher, 1999).¹²

There are numerous reasons for concluding that women and men are beneficially different. Distinctiveness stems from physiology (Angier, 1999) and from a long process of socialisation, or better said domestication, (Boserup, 1965), and from an historical mode of modernisation that has not, in most societies, produced gender-fair or balanced rule, outcomes or relationships. The task for today’s organisations is to recognise and value the complementarity of what women and men have to offer at all levels and in all facets of organisational life. But this task applies more widely.

At a societal level a complementarity balance is also needed between the ‘gender’ of organisations and institutions. By this is meant complementarity between organisations that exploit, compete, acquire and accumulate; those that collaborate and share; and those that regulate and mediate. Positive social capital is premised on relational values of reciprocity, non-exploiteness and trust. Similarly, the ‘civil’ nature of civil society is relies on values of tolerance, inclusion and fairness. These are not common attributes of corporations in competitive markets. They are, supposedly, the attributes of the non-profit sector. In other words, NGDOs would offer a ‘gender-balancing’ element within society because of a disposition to reflect and promote ‘female’ strengths. However, if the relative paucity of women leaders of NGDOs is anything to go by -- outside of the women’s

¹¹ There is also the consideration that a leader may not want a too strong, younger second cadre because it poses a threat to his or her own leadership position. Such insecurity would be a *prima facie* indicator of personal insecurity and hence of possible psychological ‘damage’.

¹² Relative neglect of gender dimension is partly attributed to the fact that, until relatively recently, men have been the researchers and interpreters of organisational behaviour.

movement -- this contribution may not be realised in practice. Nor does this role appear to be born out by studies of the gender within NGOs (Fowler, 1997; Rao and Kelleher, 1999). The question is why?

LEADERSHIP OF NGOs.

We can summarise so far by combining the perspectives stressed above. The art of being an NGO leader is complex and distinctive. It involves making correct external and internal value-based 'readings', reaching sound judgements and producing the right decisions about:

1. Salient features of a multi-layered socio-political environment: its forces, systems and dynamics.¹³
2. Embodying and articulating an inspirational civic agenda with effective point(s) of entry and processes for pursuing it.
3. The design and adaptive nature of 'organising' to bring about the envisioned change.

These elements constitute an active, continuous process and human capability. They are not events. They require constant, conscious practical attention founded on broad intelligence, personal insight, trust-inspiring values, interpersonal skill, intuition and agility. A general, working definition of NGO leadership would be:

the art of sound judgement and process of achieving self-willed social change through others within and beyond the organisation.

One question remains. How can this quality of leadership be assured and regenerated when leaders change?

Leadership Transition and Succession

There is a disturbing lack of writing and knowledge about leadership transitions in NGOs.¹⁴ The processes involved are seldom investigated and hence remain obscure. There is, however, a prima facie case to be made for an argument that the process is likely to differ in transitions from the founder leader and for subsequent changes. Why? Firstly because there is no precedent to be followed, the process must be created from scratch. Who decides how to go about it is a key issue. Subsequent changes in leadership have experience to draw on without the emotional features associated with a departing founder. Second, the founder often handpicks boards. In deference to him or her, the outgoing leader may have the most influence, if not implicit veto, on what the board decides. Third, founders are seldom, if ever, on fixed-term contracts. Their hand in their own departure – outside of unexpected death – can set important pre-conditions for the profile and process of the new person sought.

An additional complicating factor is the role of staff and donors and, in some settings, the government.¹⁵ Part of the calculus motivating NGOs staff is their right to participate in organisational decision-making, i.e., to co-own the organisation. This can extend to an acknowledged role in leader profiling and selection. Though they vow not to, donors can and (usually informally) do express their (dis-)satisfaction with a leader or indicate their concurrence with a proposed replacement.

¹³ This is not to neglect economic conditions, but to accentuate that this is not the primary concern of NGO leaders. Unlike businesses, economics is a means not an end to human, social and civic development.

¹⁴ A recent and useful US addition to this literature is Nonprofit Quarterly, Winter 2002.

¹⁵ For example, in Ethiopia by refusing a work permit the government vetoed the selection of the proposed expatriate successor to the departing founder of the Christian Relief and Development Association. In Zimbabwe, the government has exercised its legal right to remove an NGO leader.

Finally, it cannot be expected that the formation process of successor generations will resemble those of existing leaders. The world has simply moved on. The ‘struggle’ may be the same, but the setting is not (Lopa, 1996). We may be able to describe how the context has changed, but we know little about what aspects are particularly important for emerging leadership. What, then, are the important features shaping tomorrow’s NGDO leaders and how is this happening? With relatively little to go on, this study raises a curtain on how leadership transitions take place.

In conclusion, there are many facets of NGDO leadership to be considered. The major elements addressed in the Kenya study are summarised in three principle research questions.

1. Who are outstanding NGDO leaders and what makes them so.
2. How do organisational transitions in NGDO leaders occur and why; and
3. How is the successor generation of NGDOs leaders being formed?

This paper only reports on methods and preliminary answers with respect to the first question.

METHODOLOGY

Given the paucity of studies on NGDO leadership generally, and in developing countries in particular, the investigation was framed as a development and pre-test of methods. The original intention was to investigate leadership by identifying and explaining outstanding or exemplary NGDO leaders in Kenya. This approach is common to leadership in both business and politics, but can potentially suffer from excessive particularism – a problem that was consciously addressed.

To contextualise the study and avoid external definitions of what outstanding leaders look like, an introductory conference was used to elicit both local definitions of ‘high quality’ leaders as well as identifying who they were. Details below indicate that conference participants provided a fair foundation for designing methods to answer each of the research questions.

Survey respondents¹⁶

Participation at the conference – totalling some 135 people from about 80 NGDOs - was by open invitation to NGDO personnel, researchers and any other interested party. Participants reflect a reasonable cross section of NGDO people across an array of common functions. However, a number of people observed that too many NGDO leaders and board members were missing and would have benefited from attending. What type of organisations did participants represent?

Statistics describing the whole NGDO community in Kenya are not readily available.¹⁷ At the time of research some 1,600 NGDOs were registered. This number has now grown to over 1,800. Past analysis of NGDOs suggests that only 30 to 50 percent of registered organisations are in fact operational.¹⁸ If this is the case, participants represent between 10 and 19 percent of the NGDO population.¹⁹ Overall, the Council and informed observers believe that the mix and proportions of

¹⁶ Data in this sub-section draws detailed tables to be found in NGDO Capacity Building – The Leadership Dimension, Conference Summary and Discussion Paper, NGDO Council, Nairobi, November, 2000.

¹⁷ The government Registration Bureau’s data is simply derived from registration forms as a text-filled spreadsheet. This format does not lend itself to even basic statistical analysis.

¹⁸ Personal communications from Dr. Karuti Kanyinga and NGDO researcher at the Institute of Development Studies and Elkana Odembo, former chairperson of the National Council of NGDOs.

¹⁹ A further complication in ascertaining the sample size, is the fact that not all NGDOs established under alternative legislation prior to the 1992 NGDO Act re-registered under the act.

NGDOs corresponds to the situation in the country. However, participant data indicated that the almost half the organisations present have been established within the past 5 years.

While all provinces in the country were represented, the vast majority – 111 respondents or 85 percent - gave Nairobi as their location. Participants provided information about staffing for 88 organisations. Their size varied significantly, from a few volunteers to 150 full time personnel. Membership figures also showed a wide range from 1 to 400,000. Only 53 organisations gave information about annual budgets. The range of annual expenditures was from Ksh. 5,000 to Ksh. 220 million (US\$70 to 3 million).

The profile of activities reported covered almost the whole spectrum of development agendas and issues. The geographic spread of activities represent the types of things NGDOs do in rough proportion to what is going on across the country. Obviously, thematic activities like community development and capacity building are likely to involve and integrate any number of development objectives to be found in the other responses.

Conference participants were asked to complete an open questionnaire. The results indicated that, contrary to a guiding assumption, few individuals were considered by their peers to be truly outstanding. The original assumption was founded on the fact that after forty years of independence and billions of dollars of external finance to them, the NGDO community would have produced exemplary leaders. This proved not to be the case. The highest individual score obtained from the 60 replies to this question was 8. As a result, the original method was revised to answer a different question, namely:

“why after 40 years of independence and significant input of external resources, have NGDOs not made a distinctive contribution to civic leadership in the country?”

Selecting Case Studies

Given the lack of a widespread recognition of exemplary behaviour noted above, a number of key informants – donors, International NGDOs, NGDO researchers and executive members of the NGDO Council - were asked to indicate who they considered outstanding. The combination of replies allowed selection of a modest number of 14 candidates. Each was invited to take part in a detailed interview and to make their staff available for interview also.

Eleven individuals agreed to take part, six male and five female, ten Kenyan and one expatriate running a long established Kenyan NGDO (AMREF). One Kenyan was leader of an International NGDO (CCF). Their ages ranged from 32 to 62 years. Tenure as NGDO leaders spanned from 4 to 18 years, with an average of 12 years and an average of 2 organisations in which they fulfilled this role. One leader (Edah Gichukia) had retired from active leadership. Only one of the NGDOs (WOWESOK) is based on a mass membership (some 100,00 widows). All others were intermediaries. Five respondents (KCDF, FEMNET, Pamoja Trust, 3rd Domain and WOWESOK) were founders of the NGDOs they now lead or led.

Methodological approach

Given the conference results, the research method was also revised to employ a ‘grounded theory’ methodology (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This requires detailed analysis of texts derived from open questions, allowing construction of theoretical frameworks from ‘below’ rather than from existing conceptualisations. Soundness of emergent theory is derived from the spread, that is the empirical breadth or ‘grounding’ of types of respondents and their experiences, rather than from representative

samples. In other words, conceptual strength derives from the diversity that contributes to and can be explained by the resulting analytical framework. Follow-up study employing the preliminary framework was then used to test its validity or otherwise using representative techniques.

Using a semi-structured format, each individual was interviewed for approximately three hours. The interviewer was equipped with a more detailed protocol that could be used to prompt where necessary, but only as a last resort. Not all interviewees followed the format, preferring to ‘tell their story’ in their own way. Given the exploratory nature of the study, informants were asked to give their critical feedback on the interview process and content, which allowed for iterative improvement. In later stages, both leaders and staff were asked to comment on the conceptual framework emerging from ongoing analysis.

Triangulation of responses was pursued through peer questioning and staff feedback by means, again, of an open questionnaire. Twenty-two NGDO (professional) staff completed a questionnaire. This crosschecking was aided by the fact that interviewers had a long period of exposure to the NGDO scene in the country and could responsively interrogate statements of fact or interpretation.

A major limitation throughout the study was one of time. Pressure of work and travel commitments often stood in the way of easy access to individuals for interview and of creating a relaxed atmosphere.

Ongoing analysis of information gained through interviews led to further modification of methods as an analytic framework started to emerge. The most significant change was to undertake additional interviews with an array of donor agencies to the NGDO community. These included official bilateral aid agencies, international foundations and international NGDOs. Reasons for centred on the high degree of NGDO dependency on foreign aid.

Overall, as a pre-test, the study can be considered to have reasonably captured the nature and insights of some of Kenya’s successful NGDO leaders. What, then, do the findings show?

FINDINGS

Preliminary findings of the leader aspect of the study are presented in two groups. First, those derived from the initial survey. These reflect observations on NGDO leaders obtained from third parties and case studies. The second set are presented as the analysis of case study responses in terms of a conceptual framework that explains the factors that co-determine NGDO leadership in Kenya.

NGDO Leaders as Seen from Within the Sector²⁰

The presentation of survey findings follow the questionnaire in a question and answer format, followed by analytic commentary.

Q. What, in your opinion, are the characteristics of a good NGDO leader (Director/CEO)?

A. Personality attributes:

The good leadership attributes proffered by respondents generally covered personal attributes, skills (aptitudes) and administrative abilities. In respect of personal attributes, honesty/transparency and humility/accessibility were the most frequent responses. They each accounted for 32.4 percent of all

²⁰ Jeremiah Owiti mainly undertook this analysis.

answers. Some 18.5 percent of respondents placed a premium on courage and commitment. Closely following courage was good intellect, seen by 16 percent of the respondents as the most desirable personal attribute.

In terms of personal characteristics or skills, vision (27 percent), a motivating disposition (20 percent) and good training (18.5 percent) were seen as the most important attributes that a good leader should possess in that order. The implications of this are not difficult to find. Clearly, the respondents were expressing their desire to see leaders of NGDOs being more visionary in order to not only articulate powerfully to the outside world a sense of purpose and mission, but also to clarify to those that work with them the goals to which they should all strive. The high scores for motivating disposition and training are equally unsurprising. Both are requisites for the proper functioning of staff and programmes. With 14 percent respondents mentioning it, group and individual relation building came fourth in ranking of skills a good civic leader should possess. This probably answers to the need for networking that is so important in the context of NGDO work and also to counter the growing reputation of the civic sector as a realm where different actors overlap or, when motivated by resource access and control, are seen to confront or compete with one another.

From an administrative perspective, a majority 54 percent of respondents saw a good civic leader as one who is consultative and a team player. This ties up with the high score recorded for humility and accessibility and, arguably, makes a case for further opening up of channels of communication among NGDO leaders themselves and between the leaders and staff.

Q. What do you think of the present quality of leaders of Kenyan NGDOs?

A. Overall assessment:

Selfishness (31.5 percent), lack of commitment (18.5 percent) and dishonesty (10 percent) were considered to be the most observable personal attributes of present NGDO leaders. Cumulatively, the negative personal attributes stood at nearly 70 percent if arrogance (3.7 percent) and cowardice (1 percent) are considered. Only 15 percent of respondents had a positive thing to say about the leaders, describing them equally as either dynamic/energetic or courageous/committed.

Current NGDO leadership scored lowly on skills, with 32 percent of respondents describing them as incompetent and 21 percent seeing them as vision-less, unimaginative and short sighted. Some 10 percent regarded leaders as fairly competent and only a mere 9 percent regarded them as fully competent. The current array of NGDO leaders is largely seen as poor managers (29 percent).

Q. Who, in your opinion, are three outstanding NGDO leaders of Kenyan NGDOs?

A. Exemplary leaders

There was little consensus on outstanding NGDO leaders, with no leader being mentioned in even 10 percent of the cases. Nearly 60 names came up. To further underscore the indecisiveness of respondents, or lack of qualifying individuals, 53 respondents, representing nearly 50 percent of the total, did not answer this question. The other possible explanation is that respondents entered the names of the persons they are familiar with and interact with on regular basis in their respective NGDO's.

Q. How could leadership of Kenyan NGDOs be improved?

A: Improving leaders

Asked how leadership by NGDO directors and chief executives could be improved, a substantial 54.6 percent saw the answer to lie in more training, exposure and networking. About 11 percent wished to

see the leaders be more consultative, 6.5 percent wanted a code of conduct for the leaders developed and an equal percentage wanted to see proper terms of service for them. These figures could be an indicator of the generally low regard for the kind of acquired skills and training that most NGDO leaders presently bring to their jobs.

An overwhelming 75 percent of respondents saw training, exposure and guidance as the principal way to improve the quality of NGDO leaders and leadership at the level of directors and chief executive officers. Only 6.5 percent of respondents regarded the establishment of strict recruitment criteria as the way forward in enhancing the quality of leadership at that level. However, 44.4 percent of respondents thought that the best way to improve the quality of leadership at the level of board is to recruit competent persons and train existing ones. Accounting for 11 percent, respondents saw the answer to lie in recruiting committed persons and 10 percent proposed the development of clear rules and mandates for the boards.

Around 40 percent of respondents felt that training, building capacity and exposure is the best way to develop the next generation of leaders. Some 20 percent gave priority to identifying civic leadership potential early and nurturing it; while 13 percent placed a premium on encouraging the involvement of the youth in voluntary activity. Closely related, 5.6 percent respondents thought that conscious effort should be made to inculcate voluntarism in schools and colleges.

Commentary

The overall results tend to confirm anecdotal evidence that, after enjoying years of goodwill and trust, the integrity of civic leaders is being increasingly questioned. Setting the relatively high score for humility and accessibility shown as desirable in question 1 against the responses to leaders in practice underscores the growing concern in civic circles about the of images low moral integrity, absolute power and aloofness that are believed to pervade the upper echelons of NGDOs within civic leadership.

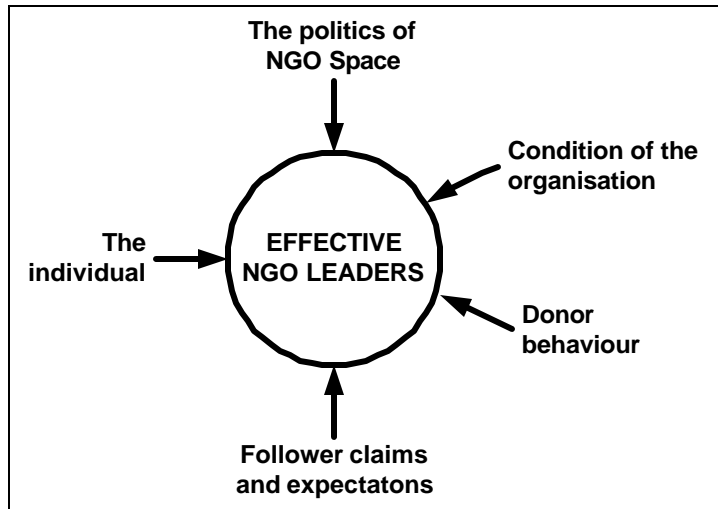
More generally, NGDO leadership in Kenya is not seen to significantly differentiate itself from the qualities and attributes of leadership in the country more widely, particularly political leadership. The question is why is this the case? What factors are contributing to low quality NGDO leadership and what might this mean for a common assumption that civil society will be the breeding ground of more democratic and honest leaders?

Factors Determining the Quality of NGDO Leaders²¹

Evidence gained so far points to five primary determinants of NGDO leadership in Kenya, both past and present. In other words, it is a dynamic, not a static framework. The five factors illustrated in Figure 1, are detailed on the basis of initial review. They will be the subjects of finer analysis.

Figure 1. Co-Determinants of NGDO Leadership in Kenya

²¹ This subsection draws extensively on Fowler, 2001b, without indicating direct quotations.



Follower Pressures from 'Below'

By this is meant the set of perceptions, expectations, demands and claims emanating from different types of 'followers', viz.

1. NGDO board and staff.
2. The domestic or home constituency of family, village, clan, tribe, etc.
3. The wider society in terms of leadership in general and NGDO leadership in particular.

By and large, the picture arising from the second two elements of 'followership' is one based on psychosocial and cultural predispositions towards: a) obligations allied to maintenance of social capital; b) patronage, allied to acquiescence if not acceptance of autocracy and 'corruption'; and c) tolerance of large power difference. NGDO professional staff, in comparison, are more demanding of an egalitarian 'first amongst equals' leadership style. What this entails is described from interview responses.

a. Internal Pressures:

The board. In many instances, board pressures are either negligible or self-serving (Fowler, 2001a). Where a board is beholden to the CEO, governance is already unhealthy. In such conditions, the demand from a board is often for some form of reward for their compliance – sitting allowances, use of the NGDOs facilities, such as transport, and so on. Leaders who create and exploit such conditions already show a questionable set of values, for example, that the NGDO is their personal possession. They act like 'sole proprietors'.

Where board and CEO relations are healthy, the leader's task is easier, but still requires conscious attention. For a start, it calls for sensitivity to different positions and opinions of board members – which is what they are there for. The good leader learns from contending views and perspectives. In addition, it requires constant awareness of the borderline between board authority over its main task of task of setting policy and CEO responsibility for and authority over operational work. Negotiating and maintaining this border is always unfinished business.

Staff. Staff measures of a good leader can be summarised as follows.

1. Not treating the NGDO as their personal possession or property, but as a temporary vehicle for them to help make a difference in the world.

2. Matching espoused values with personal behaviour.
3. Clearly expressing what the vision and mission are and what they mean in practice, i.e., an ability to translate words, dreams and aspirations into a tangible, organisational reality.
4. Knowing and expressing personal strengths and weakness and how to compensate for them through selecting and working with others without feeling threatened.
5. Giving direction and being one-step-ahead in their thinking and observations. Being an internal Think Tank.
6. Acting as a 'first amongst equals', the captain of a team.
7. Listening, listening and listening, before taking decisions and then being accountable for the consequences.
8. Being concerned about providing mentoring and the development of staff themselves.
9. Openness to continuous learning.
10. Ability to acknowledge and resolve conflicts.
11. Knowing when their time has come to leave.

In addition to the opposite of what is above, the biggest mistakes that leaders can make are:

1. Professional incompetence and defensiveness.
2. Mismanagement of resources.
3. Nepotism and favouritism.
4. Sexual harassment.

b. External pressures from society:

NGDO leaders inevitably face external pressures. Some come from government. They are dealt with in the next section. Others come from groups within society. First are those the NGDO is meant to serve. Second is from family, village, clan and ethnic group. The concept of leadership they employ has roots that seldom correspond to the technocratic assumptions of management courses. Typical is the belief that leadership equals patronage – who you are is what you bring and distribute. Dealing with such expectations is always tricky, because denial of kinship obligations is simply not a realistic option. Finally, an NGDO is part of a wider community of organisations that also bring demands.

The NGDO's Constituency. A study by Kanyinga and Torori (1999) sought opinions about NGDOs and other civic actors from three strata of respondents. They were the 'Invisibles', that is the Kenyan underclass or, more simply, ordinary citizens; a class of 'Visibles', such as teachers and prominent farmers; and a set of 'Interlocutors', such as academics, government administrators, social observers, media people, etc. One salient finding of the study is that many Invisibles, have little knowledge or understanding of NGDOs and those that do have high expectations of what NGDOs could and should do for them in terms of both delivery of services and being free to take initiatives without overbearing government constraint and political interference.

However, both this study and that of Wachira Maina (1998) confirm that, when it comes to associational life, because they have more confidence in them, people prefer to form *segmental groups* (based on kinship affinity) over *functional groups* (based on occupational, task or class ties). Moreover, they trust churches above all other forms of non-state actor. This includes NGDOs that often use church groups to select participants because of their wider network and local trust (Maina, 1998:147-149; Kanyinga and Torori, 1999:25). In other words, local claims on NGDOs do not necessarily reflect people's respect or commitment but are a response to an opportunity to access resources.

A Leader's Extended family. Social life, relations and obligations in Kenya are important, complex and never ending. To be a true 'son or daughter of the soil' requires delivering something back home. There are expectations that, once you are a leader, you can and will provide jobs or contracts or donor projects and benefits. The list and the pressures are never ending. This is where the line between what is yours to give and what belongs to the NGDOs comes under serious stress.

An answer, employed by leaders interviewed, is to actively share back home what you know about development. That is to become a willing, engaged unpaid adviser, not a conduit to resources that belong to the NGDO not to you – even if you have authority for their use. Don't deny what you have to give of yourself. Do deny that which will jeopardise the NGDO – and your own – reputation. There are no secrets in Kenya. Whatever you do will always be known. So show respect to family and to the NGDO by giving of yourself, but not of the organisation you lead. Make clear back home that the NGDO is constantly contributing to the knowledge, insights and contacts that you bring with you. Start and support local initiatives alongside your role as NGDO leader. Gain respect by your presence and spending a lot of a very limited personal resource – your time.

Finally, NGDO leadership often brings calls for you to 'get into politics' locally or nationally. This is seen to be the path to true leadership in Kenya. NGDOs are just a step on the way. Convincing domestic followers that this is not your intention or ambition is seldom easy or taken at face value. According to respondents, the constant personal message should be that, for a healthy society, leadership must reside in many places. That the compromises needed to be a party-political player are just too much to accept. That you can achieve more for society alongside politics than inside it. It is a long road to travel. It demands consistency that stems from a real conviction about the value and values of civil society and its vital role in national development.

Society at large. Feedback gathered in the study shows that, by and large, NGDOs and their leaders face a serious 'credibility deficit'. Not to 'eat' and personally benefit from the organisation you lead is considered an act of stupidity. The prevailing perception is that if you are not leading the NGDO in order to make money, you are in it as a stepping-stone to politics. When, after 1992, a number of NGDO leaders joined newly formed political parties it only confirmed what the public already believed. So society's expectations about the civic motives of Kenya's NGDO leaders are not high, rather they are low.

For many NGDO leaders, countering this negative perception is a daily, almost unwinnable, struggle. The odd cases of mismanagement by an NGDO leader simply outweigh all the examples of integrity and good practice that the media is not very interested in reporting. Counter this condition is long-term task. It requires leading by example. To show that there are exceptions to the rule, requiring courage, patience, steadfastness and a firm belief in civic values.

Political Squeeze from Above

This factor can be summarised as the 'space' allowed to the existence, expression and engagement of autonomous civic actors (Ng'ethe and Kanyinga, 1992). In broad terms, NGDO-State relations in Kenya can be understood in terms of three stages related to the foundation and security of the regime in power. The Kenyatta era saw a regime stance towards NGDOs that can be classified as one of tolerance or benign neglect. NGDOs were relatively few in number, often headed by the then politically dominant ethnic group, and thought to be of little political consequence because they provided social services alongside but seldom in competition with the government. Opposition was not thought to lie in NGDOs. The Moi era, prior to the attempted coup in 1982, continued with this basic stance, albeit with more attention to redirecting NGDO efforts to areas that had been 'neglected' in the past. That is to areas now relied on for political support, such as Rift Valley Province. In other words,

NGDOs started to be viewed as a politically useful supplemental, regime-consolidating instrument aided by their accelerated growth in number and resources (Fowler, 1993). This higher NGDO profile was allied to the 'discovery' NGDOs by donors within a conditional lending framework known as Structural Adjustment. Adjustment sought to institutionally reconfigure investment and social and economic tasks away from the state, which started to bring NGDOs to the fore as competitors for foreign aid.

The period after the attempted coup in 1982 brought a distinct change in Kenyan politics where all segments of society came under suspicion in terms of allegiance. The period up to the late nineteen eighties saw the regime exerting greater control on anything that occupied civic space, especially member-based organisation of any size and prominence. Affiliation of trade unions, co-operatives and women's movement to party organs and the move from a *de facto* to a *de jure* one-party state were just part of the repertoire of civic containment. Only the Churches managed to elude this fate.

The regime was also becoming aware that some NGDOs had emancipatory agendas. That is some were pursuing 'empowerment', which was readily interpreted by the government in terms of political intentions. In other words, NGDOs were now being seen as part of a visible and invisible opposition. Remediating this situation became an imperative that resulted, after a period of contestation, with a new NGDO Act, promulgated in 1990 and effective in 1992. The overt intention was to better co-ordinate NGDO efforts. The implicit intention was to give the state a more effective instrument for oversight if not direct control (Ndegwa, 1996; Matanga, 2001; Wamai, 2001).

Introduction of multi-party politics in 1992 has complicated how containment of civil society organisations and their leadership has been pursued (Throup and Hornsby, 1998). It has also exacerbated the notion that the only real place for leadership in society is within politics. A perception re-confirmed by a notable number of ex-NGDO leaders that joined political parties once the new dispensation came into operation, and further confirmed by the active engagement of some NGDOs in agitation for constitutional reform (Mutunga, 1999).

In sum, the history of NGDO-state relations in Kenya mirrors that of other types of civic associations in terms of leadership – state containment of any person likely to be the nexus of opposition and, where possible, their active co-optation into the only place where leadership counts – politics (Fox, Kanyinga and Long, 2000). Put another way, while relations between NGDOs and the government ebb and flow, they have been subject to a conscious process of containment and restriction with some leaders at the forefront of increasing and defending civic space, only to be absorbed into the political arena and required to play by its rules.

The Leader as an Individual

The third determinant is the character of the individual NGDO leader: their value-based drive, and commitment to civil society and 'NGDO-ism'. Interviewees identify three areas that they believe are critical in terms of the personal make up of a successful NGDO leader. The areas are motivation, values and competencies.

Motivation. People decide to take on a leadership role in NGDOs for many reasons. Up and into the early nineteen eighties, there was a strong voluntary and social ethic – a calling to do things that would improve society. For example, a common feature of the NGDO leaders interviewed was that, despite their diverse backgrounds, they had all developed a strong commitment to social justice. In other words their drive was, and still is, to rectify social ills, not to provide welfare or social services or charity.

Since then, deteriorating economic and political conditions, retrenchments and greater availability of official aid for NGDOs have shifted motivational grounds. Today, NGDOs are typically established and used as opportunities for (self-) employment. They either set out with a welfare concern to satisfy people's needs, especially those that government is less and less willing or able to address. Or – as social entrepreneurs – they see and respond to opportunities in the funding environment. As long as their work is done well and honestly, there is nothing wrong, in principle, with either of these motivations. They simply reflect Kenya's conditions.

The drawback of both, however, is that this type of motivation does not produce the energy or the 'anger', which outstanding leaders turn into a compelling message and vision that attracts and motivates others and creates trust. In other words, without a deep personal drive and commitment to a cause or belief, the NGDO's story is usually one that is too donor-fashion oriented, uninspiring and technocratic. Put another way, the NGDO becomes simply known for what it does, not for what it stands for as part of civil society and civic action.

Many leaders of this more recent motivational type would find it difficult to pass what one respondent calls the 5 Minute Test. By this he means that:

“Within five minutes the person has articulated the organisation's vision, mission and how to get there in such a way that when they leave people are convinced of their conviction, insight and credibility”.

Without this ability, the NGDO they lead will not stand out from the crowd. It will not show a value-added that acts as a magnet for good staff and donor money. In addition, when NGDOs become personal possessions and income vehicles, a leader's true interests and values will always be open to question and invite public cynicism.

Values and Self-Knowledge. Outstanding NGDO leaders suggest that two sets of values count most. The first set is internally oriented. It rests on issues of personal integrity and honesty. These are the foundation for trustworthiness that followers, funders and others see and respect. Not because of what the individual says, but because of what they do – how they lead their lives in practice. How they accept and show that they are accountable for the power that leadership brings.

The second set of values is externally oriented and rest on attitudes towards other people and the development of personal relations. Does the person believe in co-operation, mutuality and enabling others to grow and develop, where the authority of leadership is a product of followers' respect and is resilient. Or, are their values those of a *Baba Taifa*, (Father of the Nation) seeing followers as subordinate and in need of control and coercion rather than guidance? Here authority has to rely on position and is often fragile and, over the long term, less productive.

Living ones values calls for sound self-knowledge of personal strengths and weaknesses. It requires awareness of the shadow sides of ones personality. It means, in the words of one leader interviewed, living the principle of: “Anything you would never want your child to do, don't do it yourself”.

People whose life experiences have generated such self-awareness and wisdom are likely to be more secure. They are more inclined to view the input and development of staff as critical for organisational effectiveness and their own eventual replacement.

Competencies. A third personal aspect of successful NGDO leadership is a deep appreciation of the content and processes that make up the organisation's core work. Leaders are respected because they know their trade well. Typically, the necessary competencies come through a combination of education, experience and the vital ability to continually self-learn and self-develop. Leaders never stop learning. They have an enquiring mind, a spirit of curiosity. They enjoy the excitement of new challenges, without a feeling that they know it all. In other words, competencies are never complete; they are always work-in-progress.

*Donor Influence and Leader Responses*²²

Kenyan NGDOs are highly dependent on funds from external agencies. – ninety percent is a common estimate. Consequently, successful NGDOs and their leaders must be adept at managing relations with donors. They must be able to retain donor confidence without unacceptable compromise in who they are and what they want to achieve.

Despite their diversity, a common factor in donor behaviour –especially official agencies - is that they are under (varying degrees of) pressure to spend their budgets. And they all have and change policies about what they will fund. Shifting priorities often cluster official agencies together. To the outsider, this appears as if there are donor fashions that come and go; which is true. Today, democracy and governance, HIV/AIDS, capacity building and small businesses are popular. Previously it was environment, gender (now supposedly mainstreamed) and alternative technology.

What many donors also seem to share is a lack of attention to or care about the quality of NGDO governance. They appear to be wary of opening a Pandora's box of poor NGDO accountability – to the public as opposed to them – and exposing the tight knit, some say incestuous, relations between NGDO board members.

Official direct funding to Kenyan NGDOs has a history of being *ad hoc* and not particularly able to differentiate between organisations. This is changing. Like their International NGDO and Foundation counterparts, official donors are becoming more strategic in their relationships. This means assisting fewer NGDOs and changing the mode of support. After an initial 'intake assessment' increasingly, donors start with finance for small tightly defined projects, moving to larger and more unrestricted finance as a relationship of trust develops and the NGDO proves itself.

These differences and similarities influence how donors look at and influence the issue of leadership.

Donor impact on NGDO leadership. Donors, especially official agencies, have a complicated impact on NGDO leaders and leadership. On the one hand, they sensibly look to people with integrity that they can trust. This may lead to the selection of favourites that stand above the rest and are used to provide advice on who else should be recognised and financed. In other words, chosen NGDO leaders act as informal 'gatekeepers' to donors. Understandably, this gives rise to resentment and the creation of patronage relations within the NGDO community.

On the other hand, donors are uncomfortable with an NGDO that is too leader dependent or suffers from the leader syndrome (a monster that they may help to create or perpetuate). Consequently, they try and build up the internal (financial) management systems of the NGDO so that it can continue to deliver irrespective of who is the CEO.

²² This section derives from interviews with staff of ten funding organisations, including international NGOs, Foundations and bi-lateral agencies.

Donors are also known to have a direct impact on NGDO leadership by withholding funds until the incumbent is replaced. This is when they get involved with boards. But in doing so, they often make a board feel inadequate and disempowered that can lead to serious conflict amidst charges of neo-colonial behaviour.

Overall, official donors are seldom really interested in NGDO leaders and leadership as such. Ultimately, NGDO leaders are replaceable. Their concern is to ensure responsible use and the best achievement for the funds that they make available.

NGDO Leaders' responses. Successful NGDOs leaders deal with donors in a variety of ways that generate mutual trust and respect. First, they gather adequate information about the donors' own reality. What pressures are they under and why? Why do they have a particular set of priorities? On what analysis is this based? How do internal processes flow and where is the real authority for decision-making?

Second, leaders are open about organisational shortcomings as well as strengths and achievements. An open approach is much better than donors finding out about problems through the grapevine and gossip. Openness provides the leader with an opportunity to talk about remedies as well as problems.

A third approach is to make clear what the NGDO is learning from its work. Increasingly, development is recognised as an ongoing experiment and learning process. A NGDO that shows its own learning and adaptation capability inspires confidence.

Successful NGDO leaders are also able and not afraid to explain to donors how they create conditions that have a negative impact on organisational effectiveness. They can convincingly argue through why certain funding conditions can, for example, get in the way of true participation of communities. Or how too stringent ideas about overheads can work against adequate learning. In other words, show funders that they are jointly responsible for an NGDO's performance. This is what 'partnership' requires. Further, NGDO leaders avoid 'mutual capture' by donors as their favourites (Maina, 1998). They decline opportunities for gate keeping.

Finally, successful leaders do not put all their eggs in one donor basket. Too few, or a single donor, makes the NGDO vulnerable. But it also creates an unwelcome situation for the funder. They would prefer to avoid their decisions becoming an issue of 'life or death' for the NGDO.

Of course, there always remains a personal element to donor relations. Empathy, rapport and comfort in interactions take time to build up. This intangible factor makes a lot of difference when dealing with the differences, frictions and debates that inevitably occur. The quality of personal interactions requires as much attention as the other strategies and techniques discussed above.

Reading the condition of the organisation

A final factor producing good NGDO leadership is a sound reading of the condition of the organisation. The leader must develop his or her own way of quickly and accurately assessing how things are running. The approaches they use rely on both formal and informal processes and signs.

Formal Signs. All leaders interviewed agreed that a successful NGDO is one that has paid adequate attention to getting basic systems in place and making sure they run properly. Put another way, they

ensure that the 'bureaucratic hygiene' works. This includes monitoring necessary outputs and gaining feedback from stakeholders.

There is simply no short cut to making sure that the organisational basics are in place and functioning. It requires an initial investment of time and energy that eventually creates the space for the leader to lead.

One area requiring a leader's specific attention is money. Typically, NGDO leaders do not have a financial background. This weakness must be made good by learning about the basics of accounting and financial management. Financial tasks can be delegated to people with the required expertise and qualifications. But, as chief accounting officer, the leader must have an adequate technical understanding to provide adequate oversight.

Internal processes: Leaders usually put in place a regular schedule of exchanges or meetings so that everyone has up to date information. These gatherings could be weekly or less often, but they form part of the basic rhythm of the NGDO. Many interviewed emphasise a teamwork or 'family' approach to ensure that excessive divisions in staff functions do not form barriers to communication. Such meetings and events are places and moments that allow leaders to make informal readings of what is living in the NGDO.

Informal signs. There are number of informal signs that leaders use as they create their ongoing picture of the organisation. Examples are:

1. Looking for energy levels, enthusiasm, personal 'burn out' and stress.
2. Are staff showing insecurity about what the organisation is there for? Are they questioning the vision, mission or how to achieve it?
3. Are the board posing 'peculiar' questions about the NGDO, suggesting that they are being fed slanted information about what is happening within?
4. Sensing the interpersonal atmosphere. Are there fun, laughter and joking, or is everyone sombre and withdrawn?
5. Gaining 'gossip' from partners and constituencies. What is being said about the organisation 'on the street' and amongst peers? Are NGDOs or others picking up on what you are doing and applying it in their own way – a good sign of relevance and sustainability.
6. Staff 'outgrowing' the organisation. Who is showing signs of frustration, boredom, etc? How can their personal and professional growth be assisted, outside of the organisation or within.

The mix of signs a leader uses in a reading is highly individual. They emerge from a lifelong and conscious process of converting information into knowledge and then applying knowledge and learning from it. This latter process creates wisdom from proven experience, which makes an outstanding NGDO leader.

NGDO LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA AND A SEARCH FOR RELEVANT THEORY

The work so far illuminates both theoretical and practical issues in research on one organisational type within (African) civil society. In terms of general theory, the above findings are most akin to a central reductionist proposition of the contingency school's explanation of leadership, summed up as 'it all depends on the specific situation'. But, what this study points towards are contingent specifics, i.e., items that make a salient difference *with respect to conceptual level of the original question*. In other words, they limit 'useful' reductionism without overly relying on particularism.

At an intermediate conceptual level, the five factors described above interweave strands associated with social anthropology and theories of political and personal development, non-profit organisational behaviour and resource dependency. In doing so, they point to the need for a more complex, multi-variant analysis of civic leadership than is commonly employed. A possible avenue for such analysis is to approach the concept of leadership not as a trait, behaviour, role, or a dependent variable, but rather as an ‘emergent property’ associated with complexity theory. Emergence is not a linear, deterministic phenomenon, but a property arising from complex interactions between co-factors that cannot be simply implied from the factors individually (Waldrop, 1993; Lewin, 1994; Wheatley, 1994; Johnson, 2001).²³

At this stage of investigation, it may be useful to further explore how African NGDO leadership – and civic leadership more generally - arise from complex, interactive preconditions historically unknown in developed countries and then distinctly expresses itself. In other words, to further develop and test a hypothesis that civic leadership and, by implication, African ‘civicness’ is an emergent, self-organised and distinctive phenomena and unit of analysis in its own right. This requires relocating civic research outside of the common unilinear framework of historical analogy with what has ‘already happened’ in industrialised countries and, given time, will be inevitable in Africa as well (Mamdani, 1996).²⁴

An additional potentially important theoretical perspective arising from this study is that of ‘followership’. Specifically, in civil societies heavily configured around ethnic segmentation, affinity and patronage relations, we need to investigate interactions between leaders and followers that rely on shared identity and reciprocity beyond organisational boundaries.

“Traditional culture defines the individual’s identity in the following ontological formula: *congatus ergo sum*. I belong, therefore I am. This is in opposition to the individualistic dictum of Descartes: *ogito ergo sum*. I think, therefore I am. It is not the individual’s capacity to think that is the prime source of his or her identity formation, but rather the ability and reality of belonging, participating and sharing. The sharing of one’s life with another’s leads to wholeness and guarantees health.” (Masamba Ma Mpolo, quoted in Yoder, 1993:44)

Framed another way, in how far does effective civil leadership reflect the creation and maintenance of group-based identity that has a different ontology to the West?

To date, too little attention has been paid to the determinants and nature of civic followership under such deep-lying African (and Asian) psycho-cultural conditions and their socio-cultural foundations, such a *Ubuntu* (Nussbaum, 2003; Lessem and Nussbaum, 1996). Insights from theories of social identity may help us do so (Haslam, 2001).

While perhaps inviting the charge of ‘African particularism’, it is patently clear that past propagation and imposition of Western-inspired models and analysis with their attendant investments in civic capacity building and institutional and leadership development have proven insufficiently successful (Ottaway and Carothers, 2000) to rule out the merits of exploring complexity and identity as relevant theoretical approaches.

²³ For example, it is impossible to predict the properties of water from those of its ‘reductionist’ individual constituent elements – hydrogen and oxygen.

²⁴ For example, Gellner, 1994, regards traditional African forms of association as ‘pre-civic’, requiring full adoption of capitalist modes of production and relations existing in the West before one can properly talk of an African civil society.

PROPOSED FUTURE WORK.

The findings detailed above are only indicative in the sense that the study was designed as a pre-test of concepts, frameworks and methods. More rigorous investigation using representative samples will be needed to, for example, verify and assess the relative influence of these factors in shaping Kenyan NGDO leaders today and over time. Nevertheless, the present findings on leadership determinants are already robust enough to warrant further development and use.

Specifically, further work in Kenya would require a baseline survey of NGDO leaders allied to case investigations of successes and failures. In addition, robust examination of the relative importance and interaction between the five leadership co-determinants calls for additional studies in other African countries. This step will help investigate co-factor proportionality by comparison under different historical conditions and development pathways. On this basis, the validity of a grounded approach could be tested and refined.

In addition to theoretical contributions, further research would have practical use. First, it could provide information on which investment decisions could be made. For example, if the intention is to improve civic performance, findings on the existing status and quality of NGDO leadership could indicate most promising approaches for improvement. Or, if the intention is to 'build civil society' by expanding the number of viable NGDOs, next generation leadership development initiatives could be designed that are in tune with the local mix of determinants. Further, the exercise itself can spark reflection and deeper insight amongst NGDOs about the nature of leadership and an interest in its improvement.²⁵

In all cases, the preferred approach would be to identify local hosts and researchers interested in pursuing this area of enquiry and learning.

²⁵ In the case of Kenya, this study has enabled the production of three practical 'how to' guides published by the Kenya National Council of NGOs as support to local leadership development.

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