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The Role of Leadership in Successful Project Implementation: A Case Study of Zambia Rural Development Agency (ZRDA)

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of leadership in successful project implementation at the Zambia Rural Development Agency (ZRDA), addressing the critical gap in understanding leadership effectiveness within rural development contexts. The investigation was guided by five specific objectives: to analyze the predominant leadership styles and their correlation with project success rates, identify critical leadership competencies, assess project management challenges, evaluate the effectiveness of leadership development initiatives, and develop an improved leadership framework for ZRDA's rural development context. The study employed a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. With 156 participants. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 27.0 for quantitative analysis and NVivo 14 for thematic analysis of qualitative data. Findings revealed that transformational leadership demonstrated the strongest correlation with project success ($r = .687$, $p < 0.01$), while social competencies, particularly stakeholder management (RII = 0.868), emerged as more critical than traditional technical skills. Resource constraints affected 87.2% of projects, yet paradoxically, they functioned as catalysts for leadership development. Leadership development initiatives demonstrated a substantial impact, with trained managers achieving 24.7 percentage points higher success rates than their untrained counterparts. The study concludes that effective rural development leadership constitutes a dynamic capability integrating multiple approaches rather than conforming to discrete style categories. Cultural intelligence emerged as a foundational meta-competency that determines the effectiveness of other leadership capabilities. Key recommendations include establishing mandatory cultural intelligence programs, expanding the National Project Leadership Development Program, implementing systematic mentoring initiatives, and developing explicit training modules for navigating politics.

Keywords: Rural Development, Project Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Cultural Intelligence, Project Success, Leadership Competencies

1. Background of Study

Project implementation is a critical concern globally, affecting diverse sectors from infrastructure to economic development programs, with multiple research studies confirming significant failure rates across different contexts. According to the Project Management Institute's (PMI) 2021 Pulse of the Profession report, approximately 62% of projects globally meet their original goals and business intent. However, this figure drops to 54% for projects sponsored and managed by the public sector (PMI, 2021). Leadership has been consistently identified as a critical factor in project success. For instance, a comprehensive study by Ahlemann et al. (2019) identified leadership quality as the most crucial factor in determining project outcomes, accounting for 89% of the variation in project success rates. This underscores the value of effective leadership in project implementation.

The African continent presents unique challenges for project implementation. The African Development Bank (AfDB) reports that only 40% of development projects in Africa achieve their intended outcomes, with leadership and management issues cited as significant negative factors (AfDB, 2020). Between 2018 and 2022, developments in the region have focused on capacity building for project leadership. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) has implemented programs designed to enhance leadership skills in project management across various African countries. These initiatives have shown promising results, with a 15% increase in project success rates reported in participating countries (ACBF, 2019).

Statistical data from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) indicates that countries with higher investments in leadership development for project managers have seen improvements in project outcomes (SADC, 2021). For example, Botswana prioritized project management training, which resulted in a 68% success rate for development projects in 2020, compared to the regional average of 45% for countries that had not yet invested significantly in project management training (SADC, 2021).

In Zambia, the Zambia Development Agency (ZDA) reports that rural development initiatives accounted for 35% of all development projects in 2020 (ZDA, 2020). However, the success rate of these projects indicates that only 48% of ZRDA projects fully achieved their objectives, with leadership cited as a key factor in both successes and failures (MoNDP, 2019). Other studies opined that project managers with advanced leadership training were 2.5 times more likely to lead successful projects compared to those without such training (Mumba, 2020).

Comparative studies across the SADC region have identified significant differences in project leadership approaches and their effectiveness. A regional assessment conducted by the SADC Project Management Center of Excellence (2022) found that projects led by managers employing participatory leadership styles achieved success rates averaging 64%, compared to 39% for projects using primarily directive approaches. This underscores the growing importance of stakeholder engagement and team empowerment in project implementation contexts across Southern Africa.

Additional research by Chiponde et al. (2020) examining infrastructure projects across Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania found that effective project leadership accounted for approximately 37% of the variance in project success outcomes, after controlling for other variables such as funding adequacy and technical expertise. The study particularly emphasized contextual intelligence, the ability of project leaders to navigate local political dynamics, cultural nuances, and resource constraints as a critical success factor often overlooked in traditional project management approaches.

The Zambian government, recognizing these challenges, initiated the National Project Leadership Development Program in 2018, with a focus on building capacity among public sector project managers. An evaluation of this program by the MoNDP (2022) found that agencies participating in the intensive training demonstrated a 23% improvement in project completion rates and a 17% increase in stakeholder satisfaction compared to non-participating agencies. This evidence further supports the critical role of leadership development in enhancing project outcomes in the Zambian context.

Furthermore, a longitudinal study by the University of Zambia's School of Engineering (2021) tracking 76 rural infrastructure projects over five years found that leadership continuity and adaptive decision-making were stronger predictors of project success than initial technical planning quality. Projects where leaders remained in position throughout implementation and demonstrated flexibility in response to emerging challenges were 3.4 times more likely to achieve their objectives than those experiencing leadership changes or rigid implementation approaches.

These findings collectively underscore the crucial role of effective leadership in project implementation, particularly in complex contexts such as rural development in Zambia. They point to a growing body of evidence suggesting that leadership development initiatives, with a specific focus on contextual intelligence, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive management approaches, represent a significant opportunity to improve project outcomes in the region.

Project implementation is a global concern, with the success rates of projects varying significantly across different sectors and regions. According to the Project Management Institute's (PMI) 2021 Profession Report, approximately 62% of projects globally meet their original goals and business intent. However, this figure drops to 54% for projects sponsored and managed by the public sector (PMI, 2021). Leadership has been consistently identified as a critical factor in project success. For instance, leadership quality was identified as the most important factor in determining project outcomes, accounting for 89% of the variation in project success rates (Ahlemann et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of effective leadership in project implementation.

In recent years, there has been a shift toward more adaptive and transformational leadership styles in project management. This evolution reflects the increasing complexity of projects and the need for leaders who can navigate uncertainty and inspire teams (Kerzner, 2019).

The African Development Bank (AfDB) reports that only 40% of development projects in Africa achieve their intended outcomes, with leadership and management issues cited as significant factors (AfDB, 2020). Recent developments in the region have focused on capacity building for project leadership. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) has implemented programs designed to enhance leadership skills in project management across various African countries. These initiatives have shown promising results, with a 15% increase in project success rates reported in participating countries (ACBF, 2019).

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) indicates that countries with higher investments in leadership development for project managers have seen improvements in project outcomes (SADC, 2021). For example, Botswana prioritized project management training, which resulted in a 68% success rate for development projects in 2020, compared to the regional average of 45%, which is still not investing in PM training (SADC, 2021).

In Zambia, the Zambia Development Agency (ZDA) reports that rural development initiatives accounted for 35% of all

development projects in the country in 2020 (ZDA, 2020). The ZRDA, as the primary agency responsible for rural development projects, has implemented over 200 projects since its inception in 2006(Ministry of National Development Planning (MoNDP), 2019).. However, the success rate of these projects indicates that only 48% of ZRDA projects fully achieved their objectives, with leadership cited as a key factor in both successes and failures (MoNDP), 2019). Other studies opined that project managers with advanced leadership training were 2.5 times more likely to lead successful projects compared to those without such training (Mumba, 2020).

Multiple recent reports have documented significant challenges in implementing Zambia's rural development projects. According to the Ministry of National Development Planning's 2019 comprehensive evaluation, only 48% of Zambia Rural Development Agency (ZRDA) projects fully achieved their intended objectives (Ministry of National Development Planning, 2019). A subsequent study by the Zambia Development Agency found that ZRDA's rural development initiatives, which accounted for 35% of all development projects in the country, continued to face implementation challenges despite their critical importance to the national development agenda (Zambia Development Agency, 2020).

These implementation challenges are further substantiated by a 2021 research study conducted by the University of Zambia, which examined leadership factors in project success across various government agencies. The findings revealed that project managers with advanced leadership training were 2.5 times more likely to lead successful rural development projects compared to those without such specialized preparation (Mumba, 2020). Similar findings were reported in Chiponde et al.'s (2020) cross-country comparative analysis, which found that leadership effectiveness accounted for approximately 37% of the variance in project success outcomes across infrastructure projects in Zambia, Malawi, and Tanzania, after controlling for other variables such as funding adequacy and technical expertise. To investigate the role of leadership in successful project implementation in Zambia.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Approach

This study adopted a pragmatic research philosophy, which recognizes that there are multiple ways of interpreting the world and that no single point of view can capture the entire picture. Pragmatism is particularly appropriate for this research as it focuses on practical outcomes and real-world applications rather than abstract philosophical positions (Morgan, 2014). This philosophical stance aligns with the study's goal of generating practical insights into effective leadership for rural development projects in Zambia.

2.2 Research Design

The research design adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to develop a comprehensive understanding of the role of leadership in successful project implementation.. The design involved two distinct phases: a quantitative phase followed by a qualitative phase, with the qualitative phase building on and explaining the results of the quantitative phase (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Phase 1: Quantitative Study

The quantitative phase employed a cross-sectional survey design to measure leadership styles, competencies, and project success across a representative sample of rural projects. This design was suitable for capturing snapshots of current leadership practices and project outcomes, as well as for identifying patterns and relationships between variables. The cross-sectional survey was supplemented with analysis of project documentation and performance data to provide objective measures of project success.

The quantitative phase then addressed the following variables to be measured in the quantitative:

1. Independent Variables: Leadership styles (transformational, transactional, adaptive); leadership competencies (technical, emotional, social, contextual); and leadership development (training programs, experiential learning, support systems).
2. Dependent Variables: Project success (traditional metrics, impact metrics, sustainability metrics, stakeholder satisfaction).
3. Mediating Variables: Team performance, stakeholder engagement, project management practices.

Phase 2: Qualitative Study

The qualitative phase employed a case study design that explored how leadership influenced project implementation in specific contexts. This design was appropriate for understanding complex phenomena within their real-world contexts, particularly when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context were not clear (Yin, 2018). Case studies on various levels of project success and diverse leadership approaches enabled comparative analysis.

The qualitative phase involved:

1. Semi-structured interviews with project managers, team members, and key stakeholders.
2. Document analysis of project plans, progress reports, evaluation reports, and other relevant documentation.
3. Direct observation of project activities and leadership practices (where possible).

2.3 Target Population

The target population for this study was the Zambia Rural Development Agency (ZRDA) across various rural areas in Zambia. According to the Ministry of National Development Planning (2019), the ZRDA has implemented over 200 projects since its inception in 2006, with varying degrees of success. These projects span different sectors, including agriculture, infrastructure, water and sanitation, energy, education, and health, and are implemented across Zambia's rural provinces.

The specific units of analysis for this study will include:

1. Project managers: Individuals responsible for planning, implementing, and monitoring ZRDA projects. These managers will be the primary source of information on leadership styles, competencies, and practices.
2. Project team members: Staff working on ZRDA projects, including technical specialists, field officers, and administrative personnel. These team members can offer valuable insights into leadership effectiveness from the perspective of followers.
3. Key stakeholders: Representatives from relevant government departments, local authorities, traditional leaders, community organizations, and beneficiary communities. These stakeholders can provide perspectives on project success and leadership effectiveness.
4. Projects: The projects themselves will be units of analysis, with documentation and performance data providing objective measures of project success.

2.4 Sample Size

The sample size was determined using Yamane's (1967) formula, which is appropriate for finite populations where the level of precision is predetermined. The formula expresses as:

$n = N / (1 + N(e)^2)$ (Formular 01)

Where:

- n = sample size
- N = population size
- e = level of precision (sampling error)

According to ZRDA records, there are approximately 45 rural development projects that have been implemented in Lusaka Province between 2015 and 2023. Using Yamane's formula with a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error:

$n = 45 / (1 + 45(0.05)^2)$
$n = 45 / (1 + 45(0.0025))$
$n = 45 / (1 + 0.1125)$
$n = 45 / 1.1125$
$n = 40.45$

Rounding up, a sample of 41 projects were studied. This sample size was manageable yet statistically significant for the quantitative analysis.

2.5 Source of Data

Primary data was collected directly from participants through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and direct observation. The structured questionnaires were administered to project managers, team members, and key stakeholders to gather quantitative data on leadership styles, competencies, project implementation practices, and project outcomes. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions provided rich qualitative data on how leadership influences project processes and outcomes in specific contexts within Lusaka Province. Direct observation of project activities and leadership practices in action provided firsthand data on how leadership styles were enacted in selected ZRDA projects.

Secondary data was collected from existing documentation and records, including project documentation (proposals, plans, reports), ZRDA institutional records, government publications, and academic literature. Project documentation provided objective information on project design, implementation processes, and outcomes, while institutional records provided contextual information on ZRDA's approach to project management and leadership development.

The integration of primary and secondary data sources occurred at multiple levels, with the collection of primary data informed by the initial analysis of secondary data.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

This research adhered to rigorous ethical standards to protect participants' rights, dignity, and well-being. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection, with clear information provided about the study's purpose, procedures, and data usage. Participation was entirely voluntary, with participants informed of their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. For participants with limited literacy, verbal consent was obtained with a witness present. The confidentiality and privacy of all participants was protected through data anonymization, secure storage of research materials, and explicit discussion of confidentiality limitations in group settings such as focus groups.

3 Research Findings

3.1 Analysis of Predominant Leadership Styles and Project Success Correlation

The investigation of leadership styles employed within ZRDA projects represents a fundamental component of understanding how leadership influences project outcomes. This analysis examines the frequency and effectiveness of different leadership approaches, revealing patterns that illuminate the complex relationship between leadership style adoption and project success rates.

The leadership style frequency analysis reveals compelling patterns of preference that challenge conventional assumptions about the adoption of leadership styles in development contexts. Transformational leadership emerges as the clear organizational preference, achieving a mean score of 4.12 that positions it firmly within the "high" usage category according to the established interpretation scale. This finding demonstrates substantial organizational commitment to inspirational and change-oriented leadership approaches, suggesting a cultural alignment between transformational principles and ZRDA's mission-driven environment.

Table 1: Leadership Style Usage Frequency and Rankings (N=156)

Leadership Style	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	RII Score	Frequency Rank	Usage Level
Transformational Leadership	4.12	0.89	0.824	1	High
Servant Leadership	3.87	0.94	0.774	2	High
Adaptive Leadership	3.73	1.02	0.746	3	High
Transactional Leadership	3.45	1.15	0.690	4	High
Democratic Leadership	3.31	1.08	0.662	5	Moderate
Directive Leadership	2.89	1.23	0.578	6	Moderate
Laissez-faire Leadership	2.34	1.34	0.468	7	Low

Servant leadership's positioning as the second-most prevalent style (mean = 3.87) presents particularly intriguing insights into ZRDA's leadership culture. While falling marginally below the transformational approach, its high usage ranking and substantial RII score (0.774) suggest that community-serving leadership philosophies resonate strongly within rural development contexts. The slightly higher standard deviation (0.94) compared to transformational leadership implies greater variation in the adoption of servant leadership, potentially reflecting individual differences in interpreting and implementing community-focused approaches.

The moderate positioning of democratic leadership (mean = 3.31) and the low adoption of laissez-faire approaches (mean = 2.34) align with expectations for structured development environments where accountability and direction remain essential. However, the moderate usage of directive leadership (mean = 2.89) suggests sophisticated organizational understanding that purely authoritarian approaches prove counterproductive in participatory development contexts, even when structure and guidance remain necessary for project success.

Table 2: Project Success Metrics - Descriptive Analysis (N=41 Projects)

Success Dimension	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	Achievement Level	Projects Meeting Targets (%)
Traditional Metrics				
Time Performance	3.67	1.08	High	68.3%
Budget Performance	3.54	1.15	High	63.4%
Quality Standards	3.89	0.92	High	75.6%
Impact Metrics				
Development Outcomes	3.78	0.98	High	70.7%
Community Benefits	4.02	0.87	High	78.0%
Contribution to Goals	3.91	0.94	High	73.2%
Sustainability Metrics				
Project Sustainability	3.43	1.12	High	58.5%
Community Ownership	3.89	0.96	High	73.2%
Long-term Viability	3.51	1.09	High	61.0%
Stakeholder Satisfaction				
Beneficiary Satisfaction	4.12	0.83	High	80.5%
Team Member Satisfaction	3.76	1.01	High	68.3%
Funding Agency Satisfaction	3.82	0.99	High	71.7%
Overall Project Success	3.78	0.91	High	69.8%

The project success analysis reveals a multifaceted landscape of achievement that transcends traditional project

management metrics, while also illuminating areas that require enhanced attention. Beneficiary satisfaction emerges as the highest-performing dimension (mean = 4.12), demonstrating ZRDA's effectiveness in delivering community-valued outcomes despite systemic challenges.

The strong performance in community benefits (mean = 4.02) and quality standards (mean = 3.89) demonstrates organisational commitment to delivering meaningful development outcomes rather than merely completing technical activities. However, the more modest performance in sustainability metrics, particularly project sustainability (mean = 3.43) and long-term viability (mean = 3.51), reveals critical challenges in ensuring lasting impact beyond project completion periods.

The traditional project management metrics yield mixed results, highlighting the complexity of implementing rural development. Quality standards achieve the highest performance among traditional metrics (mean = 3.89), suggesting effective technical delivery capabilities. However, budget performance shows the weakest results (mean = 3.54), with only 63.4% of projects meeting financial targets. This pattern aligns with the earlier challenge analysis, which identifies resource constraints as the predominant implementation barriers. It suggests that financial pressures create cascading effects throughout project implementation, even when technical quality remains high.

Table 3: Correlations between Leadership Styles and Project Success

Leadership Styles	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Project Success	1.000							
2. Transformational	.687**	1.000						
3.Servant Leadership	.612**	.534**	1.000					
4.Adaptive Leadership	.589**	.498**	.612**	1.000				
5. Transactional	.423*	.287	.334*	.401*	1.000			
6. Democratic	.334*	.298	.445**	.534**	.567**	1.000		
7. Directive	.187	-.123	-.089	.067	.298	.234	1.000	
8. Laissez-faire	-.298	-.412*	-.234	-.156	-.098	-.187	.234	1.000

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). N = 41

The correlation matrix reveals intricate relationships between leadership approaches and project outcomes that extend beyond simple bivariate associations, illuminating the complex interplay of leadership variables within ZRDA's operational context. The strongest correlation emerges between transformational leadership and project success ($r = .687$, $p < 0.01$), indicating that leaders who demonstrate inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration create project environments substantially more conducive to successful outcomes.

Servant leadership demonstrates the second-strongest association with project success ($r = .612$, $p < 0.01$), revealing the profound importance of community-centred leadership approaches in ZRDA's operational environment. The substantial correlation suggests that leaders who prioritize stakeholder needs, demonstrate humility, and focus on empowering others create conditions that enhance project effectiveness across multiple dimensions. Interestingly, the correlation between servant and transformational leadership ($r = .534$, $p < 0.01$) indicates these approaches complement rather than compete, suggesting successful project leaders may integrate both inspirational vision-setting and community-serving behaviors.

Adaptive leadership shows significant correlation with project success ($r = .589$, $p < 0.01$) while demonstrating strong relationships with both servant leadership ($r = .612$, $p < 0.01$) and democratic approaches ($r = .534$, $p < 0.01$). This pattern suggests that contextual flexibility operates as a meta-competency, enhancing the effectiveness of other leadership styles by enabling leaders to adjust their approaches based on situational demands while maintaining core relationship-building and participatory principles essential for rural development success.

The moderate correlation between transactional leadership and project success ($r = .423$, $p < 0.05$) presents particularly intriguing insights given the tendency toward more inspirational approaches within ZRDA. While less influential than transformational or servant approaches, the significant relationship suggests that structure, accountability, and performance management remain important components of effective project leadership, particularly when integrated thoughtfully with more collaborative styles. The non-significant correlation of directive leadership ($r = .187$, $p > 0.05$) and the marginally negative relationship of laissez-faire approaches ($r = -.298$, $p > 0.05$) align with expectations for participatory development contexts where authoritarian or hands-off approaches prove counterproductive.

3.2 Identification of Critical Leadership Competencies

The analysis of leadership competencies provides essential insights into the specific capabilities that drive project implementation success within ZRDA's rural development context. This examination reveals the multifaceted nature of effective project leadership and highlights competency gaps that may influence project outcomes.

Table 4: Leadership Competency Rankings and Importance Scores (N=156)

Competency Cluster	Specific Competency	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	RII Score	Overall Rank
Social Competencies	Stakeholder Management	4.34	0.78	0.868	1
	Communication Skills	4.28	0.82	0.856	2
	Cultural Sensitivity	4.21	0.87	0.842	3
	Conflict Resolution	3.95	0.94	0.790	4
Contextual Competencies	Political Awareness	4.18	0.89	0.836	5
	Resource Mobilization	4.12	0.91	0.824	6
	Regulatory Knowledge	3.87	1.02	0.774	7
	Local Governance Understanding	3.76	1.08	0.752	8
Emotional Competencies	Resilience	4.09	0.88	0.818	9
	Emotional Intelligence	3.98	0.93	0.796	10
	Self-Awareness	3.84	0.97	0.768	11
	Stress Management	3.71	1.04	0.742	12
Technical Competencies	Project Management Knowledge	3.91	0.89	0.782	13
	Domain Expertise	3.78	0.95	0.756	14
	Technical Skills	3.65	1.01	0.730	15
	Quality Assurance	3.52	1.12	0.704	16

The competency analysis reveals a sophisticated hierarchy of capabilities that transcends traditional project management frameworks, suggesting that effective rural development leadership demands a complex blend of interpersonal, contextual, and technical expertise. The dominance of social competencies in the top rankings, with stakeholder management (RII = 0.868) and communication skills (RII = 0.856) leading the hierarchy, underscores the fundamentally relational nature of rural development work. The specific ranking of cultural sensitivity (RII = 0.842) as the third most critical competency reveals the unique importance of cultural intelligence in Zambia's diverse rural contexts. The positioning of political awareness as the fifth-ranked competency (RII = 0.836) presents particularly compelling insights into the realities of development work in Zambia's governance landscape.

Table 5: Competency Gap Analysis (N=156)

Competency Area	Required Level	Current Level	Gap Score	Priority Level
Political Awareness	4.45	4.18	-0.27	High
Resource Mobilization	4.38	4.12	-0.26	High
Stakeholder Management	4.56	4.34	-0.22	High
Technical Skills	4.12	3.65	-0.47	Very High
Regulatory Knowledge	4.23	3.87	-0.36	High
Stress Management	4.05	3.71	-0.34	High
Quality Assurance	3.95	3.52	-0.43	Very High
Domain Expertise	4.15	3.78	-0.37	High

The gap analysis reveals disparities between the required and current competency levels, highlighting systematic development needs across ZRDA's leadership cadre. Technical skills demonstrate the most pronounced deficiency (gap = -0.47), suggesting that while leaders excel in relational and contextual competencies, fundamental technical capabilities lag significantly behind organizational requirements.

Quality assurance presents another critical gap (gap = -0.43), revealing systematic challenges in maintaining consistent project standards across diverse implementation contexts. The more modest gap in political awareness (gap = -0.27), while smaller in absolute terms, represents a particularly critical deficiency given the high importance of this competency. Similarly, the resource mobilization gap (gap = -0.26) indicates challenges in securing adequate project funding and support, which may contribute to the resource constraints identified as primary implementation barriers across ZRDA's project portfolio.

3.3 Assessment of Project Management Challenges

The identification and analysis of challenges facing ZRDA project managers provides crucial insights into the operational realities that influence project implementation success. This assessment reveals both systemic and contextual barriers that leaders must navigate in rural development contexts.

Table 6: Project Management Challenges - Frequency and Impact Assessment (N=156)

Challenge Category	Specific Challenge	Frequency (%)	Impact Score	Severity Index	Priority Rank
Resource Constraints	Inadequate Funding	87.2%	4.56	3.98	1
	Equipment Shortages	78.8%	4.23	3.33	2
	Human Resource Gaps	71.2%	4.12	2.93	3
Stakeholder Dynamics	Community Resistance	68.6%	4.34	2.98	4
	Political Interference	65.4%	4.67	3.05	5
	Conflicting Expectations	62.8%	4.01	2.52	6
Infrastructure Limitations	Poor Road Access	84.6%	3.89	3.29	7
	Communication Challenges	76.3%	3.78	2.88	8
	Utility Availability	69.2%	3.65	2.53	9
Institutional Factors	Bureaucratic Delays	73.1%	4.45	3.25	10
	Policy Changes	58.3%	4.78	2.79	11
	Coordination Issues	55.8%	3.92	2.19	12
Environmental Factors	Weather Disruptions	79.5%	3.34	2.65	13
	Seasonal Variations	72.4%	3.12	2.26	14

The challenge assessment unveils a complex web of interconnected barriers that illuminate the demanding operational environment within which ZRDA project leaders must demonstrate their capabilities. The predominance of resource constraints, particularly inadequate funding affecting 87.2% of projects with a severity index of 3.98, reflects systemic challenges that extend beyond individual project management competencies into broader questions of development financing and resource allocation priorities. Equipment shortages emerge as the second-ranked challenge, affecting 78.8% of projects with substantial impact scores (4.23), demonstrating how material resource constraints cascade through project implementation phases. Human resource gaps affecting 71.2% of projects reveal the challenges of maintaining adequate staffing levels in rural development contexts, providing important context for understanding why competency gaps emerged as significant issues in the previous analysis.

Table 7: Challenge Impact on Project Outcomes (N=41 Projects)

Challenge Type	Projects Affected (%)	Average Delay (Months)	Budget Overrun (%)	Success Rate Impact
Funding Inadequacy	85.4%	3.7	23.4%	-31.2%
Political Interference	63.4%	2.8	15.7%	-27.8%
Community Resistance	68.3%	2.1	12.3%	-24.6%
Infrastructure Limitations	82.9%	1.9	18.9%	-19.4%
Bureaucratic Delays	70.7%	4.2	8.7%	-22.1%
Equipment Shortages	75.6%	2.3	16.8%	-18.9%
Human Resource Gaps	68.3%	1.8	14.2%	-17.3%

The project impact analysis reveals the devastating consequences of various challenge categories on implementation outcomes, providing quantitative confirmation of the operational difficulties facing ZRDA project leaders. Funding inadequacy emerges as the most significant challenge, affecting 85.4% of projects, resulting in average delays of 3.7 months and budget overruns of 23.4%. The substantial success rate impact (-31.2%) demonstrates how financial constraints create cascading effects that undermine project effectiveness across multiple dimensions simultaneously.

Political interference, while affecting fewer projects (63.4%), generates disproportionately severe consequences, including significant delays (2.8 months) and substantial success rate reductions (-27.8%). The high impact relative to frequency suggests that political dynamics, when they intrude into project implementation, prove exceptionally difficult to manage effectively.

Infrastructure limitations affect most projects (82.9%) yet generate more moderate success rate impacts (-19.4%) compared to other challenge categories. This pattern suggests that while infrastructural deficits create universal difficulties for rural development projects, experienced ZRDA leaders have developed adaptive strategies for managing these structural constraints. The relatively modest delays (1.9 months) and budget overruns (18.9%) indicate that organizational learning and capability development are being addressed in addressing infrastructural challenges, albeit at a considerable cost in terms of resource allocation and implementation efficiency.

3.4 Regression analysis

Evaluation of Leadership Development Initiative Effectiveness

The assessment of leadership development effectiveness provides critical insights into how organisational investment in leadership capability building translates into improved project implementation outcomes. This analysis examines the

relationship between development participation and project performance while identifying areas for programmatic enhancement.

Table 8: Leadership Development Program Participation and Outcomes (N=156)

Development Initiative	Participants (N)	Participation Rate (%)	Satisfaction Score	Perceived Effectiveness
ZRDA Internal Training	124	79.5%	3.87	High
National Project Leadership Program	89	57.1%	4.23	Very High
External Certification Courses	67	42.9%	4.01	High
Mentoring Programs	45	28.8%	4.34	Very High
Peer Learning Networks	78	50.0%	3.76	Moderate-High
International Exchange Programs	23	14.7%	4.67	Excellent
On-the-job Coaching	98	62.8%	3.92	High

Source: Author, 2025

The leadership development participation analysis reveals diverse engagement patterns across various capacity-building initiatives, with substantial variations in accessibility, satisfaction, and perceived effectiveness. ZRDA internal training demonstrates the highest participation rate (79.5%), indicating strong organizational commitment to systematic leadership development while achieving moderate satisfaction scores (3.87).

The National Project Leadership Development Program achieves the highest satisfaction rating (4.23) despite having a more limited participation rate (57.1%), suggesting exceptional program quality that creates transformative learning experiences for those who access it. International exchange programs generate the highest satisfaction scores (4.67) while maintaining the lowest participation rates (14.7%), creating a pattern that suggests exceptional impact for a highly selective development opportunity. Mentoring programs achieve very high satisfaction (4.34) with moderate participation (28.8%), suggesting practical one-on-one development approaches that could potentially be scaled to enhance organizational leadership capability.

Table 9: Leadership Development Impact Analysis - Regression Result

Variables	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	Significance	R^2 Change
Model Summary					$R^2 = 0.542$
National Program Participation	0.387	0.089	4.35	$p < 0.001$	0.149
External Certification	0.264	0.076	3.47	$p < 0.01$	0.087
Mentoring Exposure	0.312	0.084	3.71	$p < 0.001$	0.098
International Experience	0.453	0.112	4.04	$p < 0.001$.	

International experience participation shows the second-highest predictive coefficient ($\beta = 0.453$, $p < 0.001$), contributing 13.2% to explained variance despite minimal program accessibility. The substantial beta coefficient indicates that international exposure has a disproportionate impact on leadership effectiveness, suggesting that cross-cultural learning and exposure to global best practices create transformative leadership capabilities that justify selective investment, despite their limited reach. The statistical significance underscores the reliability of this relationship across the study sample.

Mentoring exposure demonstrates significant predictive value ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) while contributing 9.8% to explained variance, highlighting the effectiveness of personalized development approaches in building leadership capabilities. The moderate coefficient suggests that one-on-one developmental relationships provide substantial value through customized learning, real-time guidance, and experiential knowledge transfer that formal training programs may not fully replicate.

External certification participation shows a meaningful though more minor impact ($\beta = 0.264$, $p < 0.01$), contributing 8.7% to variance while demonstrating the value of professional credentialing in enhancing project leadership effectiveness.

Table 10: comparative performance analysis - trained vs. Untrained project managers

Performance Metric	Trained Managers (n=89)	Untrained Managers (n=67)	Difference	Effect Size
Project Success Rate	73.4%	48.7%	+24.7%	Large (d = 1.23)
Average Budget Performance	94.7%	87.3%	+7.4%	Medium (d = 0.68)
Timeline Performance	92.1%	81.5%	+10.6%	Medium (d = 0.72)
Stakeholder Satisfaction	4.12	3.48	+0.64	Large (d = 0.89)
Team Performance Score	4.23	3.67	+0.56	Large (d = 0.94)
Innovation Index	3.89	3.21	+0.68	Large (d = 1.08)

The leadership development participation analysis reveals diverse engagement patterns across various capacity-building initiatives, with substantial variations in accessibility, satisfaction, and perceived effectiveness. ZRDA internal training demonstrates the highest participation rate (79.5%), indicating strong organizational commitment to systematic leadership development while achieving moderate satisfaction scores (3.87).

The National Project Leadership Development Program achieves the highest satisfaction rating (4.23) despite having a more limited participation rate (57.1%), suggesting exceptional program quality that creates transformative learning experiences for those who access it. The substantial gap between satisfaction and participation rates suggests potential access barriers or capacity constraints that limit the program's reach, despite its demonstrated effectiveness. International exchange programs generate the highest satisfaction scores (4.67) while maintaining the lowest participation rates (14.7%), creating a pattern that suggests exceptional impact for a highly selective development opportunity. The combination of excellent satisfaction and minimal accessibility suggests that international exposure offers transformative learning experiences that justify investment, despite its limited reach. Mentoring programs achieve very high satisfaction (4.34) with moderate participation (28.8%), suggesting practical one-on-one development approaches that could potentially be scaled to enhance organizational leadership capability.

The regression analysis unveils particularly fascinating insights into the differential effectiveness of various development approaches. International exchange programs, despite minimal participation (14.7%), demonstrate the highest satisfaction scores (4.67) and substantial predictive value for project effectiveness ($\beta = 0.453$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that exposure to global best practices provides transformative learning experiences that justify their limited accessibility. The strong effect of mentoring programs ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) aligns with contemporary leadership development theory while highlighting the value of personalized developmental relationships in the ZRDA context.

The comparative performance analysis between trained and untrained managers reveals substantial practical significance that extends well beyond statistical significance, demonstrating compelling evidence for leadership development effectiveness across multiple performance dimensions. The 24.7 percentage point difference in project success rates represents a transformative organizational capability enhancement, with trained managers achieving 73.4% success compared to 48.7% for untrained counterparts. This substantial gap, accompanied by a large effect size ($d = 1.23$), indicates that leadership development constitutes a high-return investment that fundamentally alters project implementation capabilities.

Budget performance demonstrates meaningful though more modest improvements, with trained managers achieving 94.7% budget targets compared to 87.3% for untrained managers. The 7.4 percentage point difference, while smaller than success rate improvements, represents significant financial efficiency gains that could substantially impact organizational resource utilization across ZRDA's project portfolio. The medium effect size ($d = 0.68$) suggests reliable though not transformative budget management improvements attributable to leadership development participation.

Stakeholder satisfaction shows particularly impressive improvements, with trained managers achieving 4.12 compared to 3.48 for untrained counterparts.

The 0.64-point difference represents substantial stakeholder relationship enhancement, accompanied by a large effect size ($d = 0.89$) that indicates fundamental improvements in leadership-stakeholder dynamics. This finding proves especially significant given stakeholder management's identification as the most critical leadership competency, suggesting that development programs successfully enhance this essential capability. The innovation index demonstrates the largest effect size ($d = 1.08$), indicating that trained managers generate substantially more creative problem-solving and adaptive solutions compared to their untrained colleagues.

3.5 Qualitative findings

The qualitative dimension of this investigation provides essential contextual depth to the quantitative patterns identified earlier, revealing the lived experiences of leadership within ZRDA's rural development environment. Through in-depth interviews with 15 participants and three focus group discussions, this analysis illuminates the human dynamics, cultural nuances, and situational complexities that shape leadership effectiveness in rural Zambia.

Thematic Analysis of Leadership Challenges

The qualitative data analysis revealed five major themes that illuminate the contextual complexities of leadership in ZRDA's rural development projects. These themes emerged through systematic thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Cultural Navigation and Traditional Authority Interface

Participants consistently described the delicate balance required when working within traditional governance structures while implementing modern development projects. One senior project manager explained:

> *"You cannot just arrive with your project plan and expect community acceptance. The traditional leaders are the gatekeepers, and their blessing determines whether your project succeeds or fails, regardless of how well you've planned everything else."*

This sentiment was echoed across multiple interviews, with more participants identifying cultural sensitivity as essential for project success.

The complexity extends beyond mere consultation protocols. A community development officer noted:

> *"Sometimes the traditional approach conflicts with project timelines and procedures. We had a water project where the chief insisted on conducting rituals before construction could begin. The donor was getting impatient, but rushing would have undermined*

everything we were trying to achieve."

These insights illuminate why cultural sensitivity ranked so highly in the competency analysis, revealing the sophisticated cultural intelligence required for effective rural development leadership.

Theme 2: Resource Constraints and Creative Problem-Solving

The qualitative data provides rich context to the resource constraint challenges identified quantitatively. Participants described developing innovative approaches to overcome systematic funding limitations. A project manager in explained:

"When we don't have enough funding for the full scope, we engage the community to contribute labour and local materials. This creates better ownership, but it requires completely different leadership skills, you become part motivator, part negotiator, part technical advisor."

The resource scarcity appears to function as both constraint and catalyst for leadership development. As one senior manager reflected:

"Limited resources forced me to become more creative, more collaborative. I learned to see every constraint as an opportunity to build partnerships and develop local capacity."

This perspective suggests that resource challenges may inadvertently contribute to developing adaptive leadership capabilities highly valued in rural contexts.

Theme 3: Political Dynamics and Institutional Navigation

The qualitative analysis reveals the sophisticated political awareness required for effective project leadership. Participants described navigating multiple political levels, from local party politics to national policy changes. A programme coordinator explained:

"Political changes can completely reshape project priorities overnight. You need to build relationships across party lines and focus on development outcomes that transcend political affiliations."

The institutional navigation extends to managing bureaucratic processes while maintaining project momentum.

Theme 4: Technology and Communication Barriers

Rural connectivity challenges create unique leadership demands that extend far beyond simple communication difficulties. A field operations manager described:

"When you can't rely on phone or internet connectivity, you have to build stronger personal relationships and create backup communication systems. Leadership becomes much more about physical presence and face-to-face relationship building."

These challenges appear to enhance specific leadership competencies while constraining others.

Theme 5: Sustainability and Community Ownership Development

The qualitative data reveals sophisticated thinking about sustainability that extends beyond technical project completion. Participants consistently emphasized the leadership challenge of building genuine community ownership. A senior project manager explained:

"True success isn't completing the project, it's creating systems and capabilities that continue functioning after we leave. This requires leadership that empowers rather than controls."

The sustainability focus appears to significantly influence leadership style preferences. As one coordinator noted:

"Transformational leadership works because it's about building vision and capability in others. You can't sustain rural development through directive approaches because external support is always limited and temporary."

Leadership Style Effectiveness in Context

The qualitative analysis provides essential nuances to the quantitative correlations between leadership styles and project success. Participants described situational variations in leadership effectiveness, revealing the sophisticated adaptive capabilities required for rural development contexts.

Transformational Leadership in Practice

Participants provided rich descriptions of how transformational leadership manifests in rural development contexts. A programme manager explained:

"Inspirational motivation in rural settings means connecting project objectives to community aspirations. When we built the clinic, I didn't just talk about health indicators, I talked about mothers not losing children to preventable diseases, about grandparents seeing grandchildren grow up healthy."

The intellectual stimulation dimension appears particularly important for overcoming traditional resistance to change. As one manager noted:

"Rural communities are often skeptical of new approaches because they've seen many failed projects. Intellectual stimulation means engaging traditional knowledge systems and showing how new approaches build on rather than replace existing wisdom."

Servant Leadership Resonance

The high correlation of servant leadership with project success gains deeper meaning through qualitative insights. Participants described how servant leadership principles align with traditional African leadership concepts. A senior coordinator explained:

"Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes serving the community first. When project leaders demonstrate genuine commitment to community welfare rather than personal or organizational advancement, trust develops naturally."

The servant leadership approach appears particularly effective for building the long-term relationships essential for sustainable development.

Adaptive Leadership Imperatives

The qualitative data illuminates because adaptive leadership demonstrates such strong correlation with project success in rural contexts. Participants described constantly evolving circumstances that demand flexible responses. The adaptive leadership requirement extends to integrating diverse stakeholder perspectives. As one coordinator noted:

> *"Every stakeholder, traditional leaders, government officials, community members, donors, has different expectations. Adaptive leadership means finding creative ways to address multiple needs simultaneously rather than choosing sides."*

Development Program Effectiveness Insights

The qualitative analysis provides essential context for understanding why specific development programs demonstrate higher effectiveness than others. Participants offered specific insights into program design elements that enhance learning and capability building.

Experiential Learning Value

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of practical, contextualized learning experiences. A senior manager explained:

> *"Classroom training helps, but real leadership development happens when you're trying to negotiate with a traditional chief about project modifications while managing donor expectations and keeping your team motivated. You can't simulate that complexity."*

International Exchange Impact

Despite limited participation, international exchange programs generate a disproportionate impact because they provide a perspective on alternative approaches. A programme coordinator who participated in a South African exchange explained:

> *"Seeing how similar challenges are addressed in different contexts gave me completely new ideas for stakeholder engagement and resource mobilization. The exposure transforms your thinking about what's possible."*

Peer Learning Networks

The moderate effectiveness of peer learning networks appears to be related to implementation rather than concept. Participants suggested that more structured facilitation and problem-focused discussions would enhance value. As one manager noted:

"Peer learning works best when it's organized around specific challenges rather than general sharing. We need structured problem-solving sessions rather than informal conversations."

3.6 Discussion of Findings.

Predominant leadership styles employed in project implementation and their correlation with project success rates

Empirical evidence reveals a compelling paradox that challenges traditional assumptions about the effectiveness of leadership styles in development contexts. While transformational leadership emerged as both the most frequently employed style (mean = 4.12) and demonstrated the strongest correlation with project success ($r = .687$, $p < 0.01$), this finding contradicts Bass and Riggio's (2006), assertion that transformational approaches prove universally superior across organizational contexts. The substantial correlation suggests that inspirational and vision-driven approaches create conditions conducive to exceptional project performance. Yet, the magnitude of this relationship raises provocative questions about the cultural specificity of leadership effectiveness in Zambian rural development contexts.

The positioning of servant leadership as the second-most practical approach ($r = .612$, $p < 0.01$) presents a fascinating theoretical tension when considered alongside Van Dierendonck and Patterson's (2018) emphasis on servant leadership as primarily relationship-focused rather than outcome-oriented. The strong correlation with project success challenges scholarly perspectives that position servant leadership as antithetical to performance-driven environments. This contradiction illuminates the possibility that African cultural values, particularly the Ubuntu philosophy emphasizing collective responsibility and community service, may fundamentally alter the dynamics through which servant leadership influences organizational outcomes. The qualitative data support this interpretation, with participants describing how servant leadership principles align naturally with traditional African leadership concepts, creating authentic cultural resonance that enhances rather than diminishes performance orientation.

Adaptive leadership's significant correlation with project success ($r = 0.589$, $p < 0.01$) aligns closely with Heifetz et al.'s (2009) theoretical framework; however, the specific magnitude within ZRDA's context suggests contextual factors that amplify adaptive approaches beyond their typical effectiveness. The correlation patterns reveal that adaptive leadership operates as a meta-competency, demonstrating strong relationships with both servant leadership ($r = .612$, $p < 0.01$) and democratic approaches ($r = .534$, $p < 0.01$). This interconnectedness challenges Fiedler's (1964) contingency theory assumption that leadership styles operate as distinct, situationally determined approaches. Instead, the evidence suggests a more complex model where effective rural development leaders integrate multiple styles dynamically, creating hybrid approaches that transcend traditional theoretical boundaries.

The moderate correlation between transactional leadership and project success ($r = .423$, $p < 0.05$) presents perhaps the most intellectually intriguing finding, directly contradicting contemporary scholarly trends that position transactional approaches as outdated or ineffective in modern organizational contexts. This relationship gains theoretical significance when considered alongside Xiangxing and Musonda's (2021) findings in Zambian construction contexts, suggesting that cultural and institutional factors may create environments where structure, accountability, and clear performance

expectations remain essential for project success. The tension between this finding and the dominance of transformational leadership reveals the sophisticated leadership demands of rural development work, where an inspirational vision must be grounded in practical implementation structures.

The weak correlation of directive leadership ($r = .187$, $p > 0.05$) and the marginally negative relationship of laissez-faire approaches ($r = -.298$, $p > 0.05$) confirm theoretical expectations while providing empirical validation for participatory development approaches in African contexts. However, the qualitative evidence reveals nuanced situational requirements for directive approaches, particularly during crises or when dealing with external stakeholders unfamiliar with participatory processes. This complexity suggests that leadership effectiveness in rural development contexts requires sophisticated situational awareness, enabling leaders to employ directive approaches selectively without undermining overall participatory orientations.

The integration of quantitative correlations with qualitative insights reveals a more sophisticated leadership landscape than traditional theoretical frameworks suggest. Participants described leadership as contextually fluid, requiring constant adaptation between inspirational vision-setting, community-serving behaviours, and structured implementation approaches. This finding challenges the academic tendency to categorize leadership styles as discrete phenomena, suggesting instead that effective rural development leadership constitutes a dynamic capability that integrates multiple theoretical traditions in response to situational demands and cultural contexts.

Critical leadership competencies that contribute to successful project implementation

The competency hierarchy revealed through this investigation fundamentally challenges conventional project management wisdom regarding the primacy of technical expertise. The dominance of social competencies, with stakeholder management (RII = 0.868) and communication skills (RII = 0.856) leading the rankings, directly contradicts the Project Management Institute's (2017) emphasis on technical knowledge as the foundation of project leadership. This finding aligns more closely with Sampaio et al.'s (2022) emphasis on behavioral competencies; however, the specific magnitude of social competency importance in the ZRDA context suggests contextual factors that amplify relational capabilities beyond their typical significance in the project management literature.

The positioning of cultural sensitivity as the third-most critical competency (RII = 0.842) illuminates a significant gap in mainstream project management theory, which typically treats cultural intelligence as a supplementary rather than core competency. This finding resonates with Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory yet extends beyond his framework by positioning cultural sensitivity not merely as adaptation to local contexts, but as fundamental to project implementation success. The qualitative data reveal that cultural sensitivity operates as both a technical competency—enabling navigation of traditional governance structures—and an emotional competency that builds trust and legitimacy within rural communities.

Political awareness, emerging as the fifth-ranked competency (RII = 0.836), presents an exceptionally provocative finding that challenges the supposed neutrality of development work. This result aligns with Abankwa and Arditi's (2018) research on African development contexts; however, the specific importance ranking suggests that political dynamics may be more central to project success than the development literature typically acknowledges. The finding creates theoretical tension with mainstream project management approaches that position political considerations as external constraints rather than core competencies. This contradiction raises fundamental questions about whether traditional project management frameworks adequately address the realities of development work in politically complex environments.

The relatively low ranking of technical competencies presents perhaps the most intellectually challenging finding, with project management knowledge ranking only 13th among measured competencies. This result directly contradicts Müller and Turner's (2017) competency framework, which posits that technical expertise is foundational to effective project leadership. The contradiction highlights a fundamental disconnect between project management theory, primarily developed in Western corporate contexts, and the realities of rural development implementation in African settings. The qualitative evidence suggests that technical competencies, while necessary, become secondary to the complex relationship-building and contextual navigation required for project success in rural Zambian contexts.

The competency gap analysis reveals systematic challenges that extend beyond individual capability development, indicating structural issues within ZRDA's organizational systems. The substantial technical skills gap (gap = -0.47) creates an intriguing paradox when considered alongside the relatively low importance ranking of technical competencies. This contradiction suggests that while technical capabilities may not directly predict project success, their absence creates implementation barriers that constrain even relationally gifted leaders. The quality assurance gap (gap = -0.43) exacerbates this challenge, highlighting systematic difficulties in maintaining consistent project standards despite strong stakeholder relationships.

The political awareness gap (gap = -0.27), while smaller in magnitude, represents a critical deficiency given the high importance ranking of this competency. This finding aligns with Chiponde et al.'s (2020) emphasis on contextual intelligence while revealing the challenges of developing political sophistication within traditional organizational development frameworks. The gap suggests that ZRDA's leadership development initiatives may not adequately address the complex political navigation skills required for effective rural development work.

The competency patterns revealed through this analysis suggest a need for fundamental reconceptualization of project leadership in development contexts. Rather than viewing competencies as individual capabilities to be developed through training, the evidence suggests that competencies emerge from the interaction between personal capabilities, organizational systems, and contextual demands. This perspective challenges human resource development approaches

that focus primarily on individual skill building, suggesting instead that competency development must address systemic and contextual factors that enable or constrain leadership effectiveness.

Challenges faced by project managers that impact project outcomes

The challenge landscape revealed through this investigation exposes fundamental contradictions between development rhetoric and the realities of implementation. The predominance of resource constraints, with inadequate funding affecting 87.2% of projects and generating the highest severity index (3.98), challenges the sustainability discourse that dominates development literature. This finding directly contradicts the assumption underlying most development frameworks that projects are adequately resourced for success, revealing instead a systematic under-resourcing that forces project leaders to operate in permanently constrained environments.

The devastating impact of funding inadequacy, generating average delays of 3.7 months and budget overruns of 23.4%, creates a paradoxical situation where projects designed to address resource scarcity are themselves systematically under-resourced. This contradiction illuminates deeper structural issues within development financing mechanisms that prioritize project proliferation over adequate funding, forcing individual project leaders to manage systemic failures through exceptional personal capabilities. The qualitative evidence reveals how resource constraints simultaneously constrain and catalyze leadership development, forcing managers to develop creative problem-solving and partnership-building capabilities that might remain undeveloped in adequately resourced environments.

Political interference, while affecting fewer projects (63.4%), generates disproportionately severe consequences with a -27.8% success rate impact, revealing the complex relationship between development work and political dynamics. This finding challenges the technical neutrality assumed in much project management literature, confirming instead that development projects operate within inherently political environments where external political dynamics can overwhelm technical competence. The contradiction between development sector aspirations for technical neutrality and the empirical reality of political influence raises fundamental questions about the adequacy of project management frameworks that fail to address political navigation as a core competency.

Infrastructure limitations affecting 82.9% of projects yet generating more moderate success rate impacts (-19.4%) present an intriguing paradox that illuminates organizational learning and adaptation capabilities. The relatively modest impact, despite a high frequency, suggests that ZRDA leaders have developed sophisticated strategies for managing structural constraints, transforming potential project failures into acceptable outcomes through adaptive management approaches. These finding challenges deterministic perspectives that view infrastructure deficits as insurmountable barriers, revealing instead the capacity of experienced leaders to navigate structural limitations through creative solution development.

The challenge impact patterns reveal a more complex relationship between external constraints and project outcomes than traditional project management theory suggests. Rather than operating as simple barriers to success, challenges appear to function as catalysts for leadership development and organizational capability building. This perspective aligns with resilience theory in organizational psychology yet extends beyond individual resilience to suggest institutional resilience that emerges from systematic exposure to challenging implementation environments.

The bureaucratic delays affecting 70.7% of projects while generating 4.2-month average delays illuminate the contradiction between development sector efficiency aspirations and the institutional realities of public sector implementation. This finding challenges New Public Management theories that position bureaucratic reform as sufficient for improving development outcomes, revealing instead the persistence of institutional constraints that resist technical solutions. The qualitative evidence suggests that effective project leaders develop sophisticated institutional navigation capabilities that enable progress despite bureaucratic constraints, transforming institutional challenges into opportunities for stakeholder engagement and relationship building.

The environmental challenges, while generating lower impact scores, reveal the complex interaction between climate variability and project implementation in rural contexts. Weather disruptions affecting 79.5% of projects illuminate the vulnerability of rural development initiatives to climate variability, challenging project management approaches that assume stable implementation environments. This finding gains particular significance within climate change discourse, suggesting that effective rural development leadership requires capabilities for managing environmental uncertainty that extend beyond traditional project management competencies.

Effectiveness of current leadership development initiatives

The leadership development impact analysis reveals a complex relationship between organizational investment and capability enhancement, challenging conventional assumptions about training effectiveness. The 24.7 percentage point difference in project success rates between trained and untrained managers represents a substantial practical impact that validates leadership development investment, yet the magnitude of this difference raises provocative questions about the mechanisms through which development translates into improved performance. This finding aligns with Mumba's (2020) research on Zambian leadership development while suggesting that the impact may be even more substantial than previous studies indicated.

The regression analysis unveiling international experience as the strongest predictor of project effectiveness ($\beta = 0.453$, $p < 0.001$) despite minimal participation (14.7%) creates a fascinating paradox that challenges scalability assumptions in organizational development. This finding suggests that transformative learning experiences may be more valuable than broad-based training approaches, contradicting human resource development theories that emphasize systematic skill building across entire organizational populations. The disproportionate impact of international exchange programs illuminates the importance of perspective transformation in leadership development, aligning with Mezirow's (1997)

transformative learning theory while revealing the specific mechanisms through which cross-cultural exposure enhances leadership effectiveness.

The strong effect of mentoring programs ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) with only 28.8% participation reveals the untapped potential of personalized development approaches within ZRDA's organizational context. This finding challenges the efficiency assumptions underlying large-scale training programs, suggesting instead that intensive, relationship-based development may generate superior returns on investment despite higher per-participant costs. The contradiction between the effectiveness of mentoring and its limited adoption highlights organizational barriers to implementing high-impact development approaches, indicating systemic issues that hinder optimal resource allocation for leadership development.

The National Project Leadership Development Program's emergence as the strongest predictor by volume ($\beta = 0.387$, $p < 0.001$) while achieving high satisfaction (4.23) despite moderate participation (57.1%) suggests that structured, comprehensive programs can achieve both scale and impact when properly designed. This finding validates systematic approaches to leadership development while revealing the importance of program quality over quantity in achieving meaningful capability enhancement. The contrast between the effectiveness of national programs and ZRDA internal training satisfaction (3.87) highlights design factors that differentiate transformative from routine training experiences.

The comparative performance analysis reveals leadership development impacts that extend far beyond simple skill enhancement, with trained managers demonstrating large effect sizes in stakeholder satisfaction ($d = 0.89$) and innovation ($d = 1.08$). These findings challenge mechanistic perspectives on leadership development that focus primarily on skill acquisition, suggesting instead that effective development programs enhance fundamental leadership capabilities that simultaneously influence multiple performance dimensions. The powerful innovation effect suggests that leadership development may enhance creative problem-solving and adaptive capacity, capabilities that prove especially valuable in resource-constrained rural development contexts.

The moderate effectiveness of peer learning networks (satisfaction = 3.76) despite their theoretical promise illuminate's implementation challenges that constrain collaborative learning approaches. The qualitative evidence suggests that peer learning effectiveness depends heavily on the quality of structure and facilitation, challenging the assumption that informal knowledge sharing naturally generates learning outcomes. This finding aligns with the literature on communities of practice, while revealing the specific organizational conditions required for effective peer learning in development contexts.

The development impact patterns revealed through this analysis suggest that leadership development effectiveness depends on program characteristics that extend beyond content delivery to include perspective transformation, relationship building, and experiential learning. These findings challenge training-focused approaches to leadership development, suggesting instead that effective programs must address the complex interaction between individual capabilities, organizational systems, and contextual demands that shape leadership effectiveness in rural development contexts.

Leadership framework for improving project implementation success rates

The empirical evidence generates several interconnected theoretical propositions that collectively challenge existing leadership frameworks while pointing toward a new conceptual model specifically adapted for rural development contexts. The integration of quantitative correlations with qualitative insights reveals that effective rural development leadership constitutes a dynamic capability that transcends traditional theoretical boundaries, requiring leaders to integrate multiple styles, competencies, and contextual responses based on situational demands and cultural factors.

The first theoretical proposition emerging from this analysis positions cultural intelligence as a meta-competency that fundamentally shapes the effectiveness of other leadership capabilities. Unlike mainstream project management frameworks that treat cultural adaptation as supplementary, the evidence suggests that cultural intelligence operates as a foundational capability that determines whether other competencies can be effectively deployed within specific contextual settings. This proposition challenges the Universalist assumptions underlying much leadership theory, suggesting instead that leadership effectiveness emerges from the dynamic interaction between individual capabilities and cultural contexts.

The second proposition positions adaptive capacity as the central organizing principle for rural development leadership, extending beyond Heifetz et al.'s (2009) adaptive leadership framework to encompass systematic capability for integrating multiple leadership approaches based on situational demands. The evidence suggests that effective rural development leaders develop sophisticated situational awareness, enabling them to employ transformational inspiration, a servant-oriented community focus, and a transactional structure strategically rather than exclusively. This proposition challenges theoretical frameworks that position leadership styles as distinct alternatives, suggesting instead a more complex model of leadership integration.

The third proposition addresses the relationship between resource constraints and leadership development, suggesting that systematic resource scarcity creates unique development environments that simultaneously constrain and catalyze leadership capability enhancement. The evidence reveals that leaders operating in resource-constrained contexts develop creative problem-solving, partnership-building, and adaptive management capabilities that might remain undeveloped in adequately resourced environments. This proposition challenges deficit-based perspectives on resource constraints, suggesting instead that systematic constraints can function as capability development catalysts when combined with appropriate organizational support systems.

The fourth proposition concerns the political dimensions of rural development leadership, positioning political intelligence as a core rather than peripheral competency for project success. The evidence suggests that effective rural development leadership requires sophisticated capability for navigating multiple political levels while maintaining

technical focus and community engagement. This proposition challenges the technical neutrality assumptions underlying much project management theory, suggesting instead that political navigation represents a fundamental competency for development work in complex governance environments.

The integrated framework emerging from these propositions suggests a new model of rural development leadership that positions cultural intelligence, adaptive capacity, resourcefulness, and political acumen as core competencies, enabling the effective deployment of traditional leadership styles and technical capabilities. This framework challenges existing leadership development approaches that focus primarily on individual skill building, suggesting instead that effective development must address the complex interaction between personal capabilities, organizational systems, and contextual demands.

The framework implications for ZRDA practice suggest several strategic priorities for enhancing leadership effectiveness. First, leadership development initiatives should prioritize the development of cultural intelligence through immersive community engagement and navigation of traditional governance systems. Second, adaptive capacity building should focus on developing systematic capabilities for integrating multiple leadership approaches, rather than promoting the adoption of a single style. Third, resource creativity development should be positioned as a core competency rather than a constraint management strategy. Fourth, the development of political intelligence should be explicitly addressed through structured programs rather than left to experiential learning.

The framework also suggests organizational system modifications that could enhance leadership effectiveness beyond individual capability development. These include restructuring project design processes to integrate community engagement requirements better, developing organizational support systems that enable creative resource mobilization, and creating institutional mechanisms that support political navigation while maintaining technical focus.

4 Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

4.1 Summary of Findings

The investigation revealed a complex leadership landscape that fundamentally challenges conventional project management wisdom, highlighting the predominance and exceptional effectiveness of transformational leadership within ZRDA's rural development context. Transformational leadership emerged not merely as the most frequently employed style but demonstrated the strongest correlation with project success ($r = .687$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that inspirational and vision-driven approaches create uniquely conducive conditions for rural development outcomes. Yet this finding gains , more profound significance when considered alongside the substantial effectiveness of servant leadership ($r = .612$, $p < 0.01$), revealing how community-serving philosophies align naturally with traditional African leadership concepts to enhance, rather than diminish, performance orientation.

The competency analysis exposed a striking inversion of traditional project management priorities, with social competencies dominating the effectiveness hierarchy while technical expertise ranked surprisingly low. Stakeholder management emerged as the paramount competency (RII = 0.868), followed closely by communication skills and cultural sensitivity, illuminating the fundamentally relational nature of rural development work that extends far beyond technical project delivery. This pattern challenges the Project Management Institute's emphasis on technical knowledge as foundational, suggesting instead that success in development contexts depends primarily on sophisticated relationship-building and cultural navigation capabilities.

Resource constraints emerged as both the most pervasive challenge affecting 87.2% of projects and the catalyst for innovative leadership development within ZRDA's operational environment. The paradoxical relationship between systematic under-resourcing and leadership capability enhancement highlights how constraints compel managers to develop creative problem-solving and partnership-building skills that often remain underdeveloped in adequately funded contexts. Political interference, although affecting fewer projects, generated disproportionately devastating impacts, with a success rate reduction of -27.8%, exposing the complex political dynamics that development projects must navigate, despite aspirations for technical neutrality.

Leadership development initiatives demonstrated remarkable effectiveness, with trained managers achieving 24.7 percentage points higher success rates than their untrained counterparts. However, the analysis revealed significant variations in program impact, which illuminate design factors that differentiate transformative from routine development experiences. International exchange programs yielded the highest predictive coefficient ($\beta = 0.453$), despite minimal participation, whereas mentoring achieved a substantial impact through personalized approaches that formal training programs struggle to replicate. These patterns suggest that perspective transformation and relationship-based learning may prove more valuable than broad-based skill development for enhancing leadership effectiveness in rural contexts.

4.2 Conclusions

The analysis shows that successful rural development leadership is not confined to a single style but relies on a dynamic blend of transformational, servant, adaptive, and transactional approaches. Relational and contextual competencies especially stakeholder management, communication, cultural sensitivity, and political awareness prove more critical than technical skills. While resource constraints and political interference hinder project implementation, they also foster leadership growth by promoting creativity and strategic navigation. Leadership development programmes significantly

improve performance, with international exposure and mentoring offering the greatest impact. Overall, the study proposes an enhanced leadership framework in which cultural intelligence forms the foundation, adaptive capacity integrates multiple leadership approaches, and resource creativity and political navigation emerge as essential competencies for effective rural development.

4.3 Recommendations

1. Senior Management should establish mandatory cultural intelligence development programs for all project managers, incorporating extended community immersion experiences and traditional governance navigation training, as the research demonstrates cultural sensitivity's paramount importance (RII = 0.842) for project success in diverse rural contexts.
2. The Ministry of National Development Planning should expand the National Project Leadership Development Program to achieve universal coverage across ZRDA, given its demonstrated predictive power ($\beta = 0.387$, $p < 0.001$) and superior satisfaction ratings compared to internal training initiatives.
3. Human Resources should implement systematic mentoring programs pairing experienced project managers with developing leaders, as mentoring demonstrated significant predictive value ($\beta = 0.312$, $p < 0.001$) despite limited current utilization, representing untapped potential for leadership enhancement.
4. Development Partners should prioritize international exchange opportunities for high-potential managers, as international experience generated the strongest predictive coefficient ($\beta = 0.453$) for project effectiveness, justifying selective investment despite limited accessibility.
5. Project Management Office should develop explicit political navigation training modules, addressing the critical competency gap (gap = -0.27) in political awareness that significantly impacts project outcomes in complex governance environments.
6. The Government of Zambia should establish dedicated funding mechanisms for rural development projects that account for systematic resource constraints, as inadequate funding affects 87.2% of projects with devastating success rate impacts (-31.2%), requiring structural rather than managerial solutions.
7. The Training Department should redesign internal development programs to emphasize experiential learning and practical application, given the moderate satisfaction scores (3.87) compared to external programs, focusing on transformative rather than routine training experiences.

4.4 Limitations of the Study

The geographic focus on Lusaka Province, while enabling in-depth contextual analysis, constrains the generalizability of findings across Zambia's diverse provincial contexts where different cultural, political, and economic dynamics may influence leadership effectiveness patterns. Rural areas in Northwestern or Eastern provinces may present distinct leadership challenges that this investigation could not capture, potentially limiting the applicability of the developed framework to broader operational context. Additionally, the retrospective assessment of project success may be influenced by participant perceptions and memory limitations, potentially affecting the accuracy of leadership-outcome correlations.

4.5 Recommendations for Future Research

1. Comparative research across multiple African development agencies could illuminate whether the leadership patterns identified within ZRDA reflect broader regional characteristics or represent organization-specific phenomena that limit theoretical generalizability. Future investigations might explore how different institutional contexts, funding mechanisms, and governance structures influence the relative importance of various leadership competencies, potentially refining the theoretical framework developed through this research.
2. Mixed-methods investigations incorporating beneficiary perspectives could provide crucial insights into how different leadership approaches influence community outcomes and sustainability, dimensions that project success metrics may inadequately capture. Research designs that systematically include community voices might reveal whether leadership styles that achieve short-term project success also generate the long-term community ownership and capacity development essential for sustainable rural development.
3. Advanced statistical modeling employing structural equation modeling techniques could better illuminate the complex mediating relationships between leadership styles, competencies, contextual challenges, and project outcomes that this investigation identified but could not fully explore. Such analyses might reveal whether team performance, stakeholder engagement, and project management practices function as theorized mediating variables, offering more sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms through which leadership influences rural development success.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The authors declare that they are not aware of any competing financial interests or personal relationships that may have influenced the work described in this document.

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Ethical considerations

The article followed all ethical standards appropriate for this kind of research.

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