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Understanding Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa: Insights from Organizational and Social Psychology

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Abstract

This review examines leadership dysfunction through the lens of organizational and social psychology, integrating insights from transformational leadership theory, social identity theory, institutional theory, and moral psychology. Using a narrative review approach, the study synthesizes empirical and theoretical literature published between 2000 and 2025. The findings reveal that leadership dysfunction is a multidimensional phenomenon driven by individual traits such as narcissism and moral disengagement, socio-cultural dynamics such as ethnicity and power distance, and institutional weaknesses including lack of accountability and transparency. The study further highlights psychological mechanisms such as cognitive biases, groupthink, and social dominance that reinforce dysfunctional leadership practices. The consequences include reduced economic development, low organizational performance, erosion of public trust, and increased insecurity. The study concludes by proposing a multi-level intervention framework that integrates leadership development, institutional reforms, and behavioral change strategies. The paper contributes to the growing literature by offering a psychologically grounded explanation of leadership failures in Sub-Saharan Africa and providing actionable recommendations for policy and practice.

Keywords: *Leadership dysfunction, Sub-Saharan Africa, Organizational and Social Psychology,*

Introduction

Leadership plays a central role in shaping institutional effectiveness, governance outcomes, and socio-economic development. Across Sub-Saharan Africa, however, leadership has often been characterized by dysfunction, manifesting in poor governance, weak institutional capacity, corruption, and limited developmental progress. Leadership dysfunction refers to patterns of behavior and structural deficiencies that undermine the ability of leaders to effectively guide organizations, governments, and societies toward collective goals. These dysfunctions are not merely individual shortcomings but are deeply embedded in socio-political systems, organizational cultures, and historical trajectories (World Bank, 2020; United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

From a global perspective, effective leadership is widely recognized as a key determinant of development outcomes. The World Bank (2020) emphasizes that governance quality driven largely by leadership significantly influences economic growth, social welfare, and institutional performance. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, leadership challenges persist despite decades of reforms and democratization efforts. According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, which evaluates governance across 54 African countries using over 80 indicators, many countries in the region continue to experience stagnation or decline in

governance quality. Recent evidence further indicates that nearly half of Africa's population lives in countries where governance has deteriorated over the past decade, driven largely by insecurity, corruption, and weak institutional frameworks

Traditional explanations of leadership challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa have largely emphasized structural and political-economic factors such as colonial legacies, weak state institutions, and global economic inequalities (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). While these perspectives provide important insights, they often overlook the behavioral and psychological dimensions of leadership. Leadership is not only a structural phenomenon but also a deeply human process shaped by cognition, personality, emotions, and social interactions. As such, understanding leadership dysfunction requires moving beyond macro-level explanations to incorporate micro- and meso-level psychological processes that influence how leaders think, behave, and make decisions.

From the perspective of organizational psychology and social psychology, leadership behaviour is strongly influenced by personality traits, organizational culture, emotional regulation, social identity, group dynamics, cognitive biases, and power relations (Rosenthal & Pittinsky, 2006). Organizational psychology explains how leadership styles, workplace climate, motivation systems, ethical culture, and institutional structures affect organizational effectiveness and employee behaviour (Akinola & Soyemi, 2023). Social psychology, on the other hand, examines how conformity, obedience, prejudice, stereotypes, social identity, intergroup relations, and collective behaviour shape leadership emergence and public attitudes toward authority (Ebegbulem, 2021). These perspectives are particularly relevant in Sub-Saharan Africa where ethnicity, religion, political patronage, regional loyalties, and socioeconomic inequalities significantly influence leadership selection, governance processes, and institutional trust. Recent studies conducted within African contexts have shown that toxic leadership, corruption, and institutional inefficiency are often sustained by collective tolerance for unethical practices, low psychological empowerment, weak civic engagement, and normalized abuse of authority (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2022; Adeyemi, 2023). Additionally, Social Dominance Theory suggests that hierarchical social structures enable dominant groups to maintain power and control resources, often at the expense of marginalized populations (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999).

The consequences of leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa are far-reaching. Economically, poor leadership contributes to corruption, mismanagement of public resources, weak economic planning, reduced foreign investment, unemployment, and limited economic diversification (World Bank, 2024; Acemoglu & Robinson, 2021). Several studies have shown that weak governance and corruption significantly reduce economic growth and discourage investor confidence across many African countries (Akinola & Soyemi, 2023; Ebegbulem, 2021). According to Transparency International (2025), countries with persistent governance failures and high corruption levels continue to experience poor infrastructural development, weak institutional performance, and increasing poverty rates. Similarly, the African Development Bank reported that governance instability and ineffective leadership remain major barriers to sustainable development and economic transformation in Sub-Saharan Africa (AfDB, 2024).

Similarly, studies by Cheeseman and Fisher (2021) found that weak leadership and patronage politics contribute significantly to ethnic polarization, democratic instability, and social fragmentation in African societies. Insecurity linked to terrorism, banditry, insurgency, electoral violence, and communal conflict has also been associated with governance failures, weak institutional responses, and poor leadership accountability in countries such as Nigeria,

Mali, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (Okeke, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2024).

Therefore, this study aims to critically examine the psychological drivers underlying the persistent leadership crisis in Sub-Saharan Africa and their implications for governance, institutional effectiveness, and socioeconomic development. By integrating insights from organizational psychology, social psychology, political psychology, and leadership studies, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how psychological factors such as narcissism, power motivation, authoritarian tendencies, cognitive biases, and weak ethical orientation contribute to ineffective leadership and governance outcomes. The study further intends to explore the consequences of these leadership challenges for democratic stability, public trust, institutional performance, security, and sustainable development across the region. Ultimately, the study contributes to existing scholarship by proposing psychologically informed strategies for promoting ethical, transformational, and accountable leadership capable of addressing the complex governance challenges confronting Sub-Saharan African societies in the twenty-first century.

Theoretical Framework

This section reviews four theories that are especially useful for explaining leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa: *transformational leadership theory*, *social identity theory*, *institutional theory*, and *moral psychology*. Together, they help explain why leadership failure in the region is not only a matter of individual weakness, but also a product of group dynamics, institutional incentives, and moral decision-making contexts.

Transformational leadership theory, originally developed by James MacGregor Burns (1978) and later expanded by Bernard M. Bass (1985) and Bruce J. Avolio (1994), posits that effective leaders inspire followers to transcend self-interest for collective goals through vision, motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The theory emphasizes moral leadership and long-term transformation of institutions and societies. However, in many Sub-Saharan African contexts, leadership often deviates from these ideals. Instead of fostering collective development, leaders frequently prioritize patronage networks, political survival, and short-term gains. This absence of transformational leadership is reflected in persistent governance challenges, including corruption, weak policy implementation, and low institutional trust. Thus, the theory is useful in highlighting the gap between ideal leadership and the prevailing leadership realities in the region.

Social identity theory, developed by Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner (1979), explains how individuals derive their identity from group membership such as ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. The theory posits that individuals tend to favor their in-group while discriminating against out-groups, a process that significantly shapes leadership and followership dynamics. In Sub-Saharan Africa, leadership legitimacy is often rooted in identity-based affiliations rather than competence or performance. Leaders mobilize support through ethnic or regional loyalties, which leads to favoritism, exclusion, and unequal distribution of resources. This dynamic contributes to leadership dysfunction by reinforcing division, weakening national cohesion, and sustaining support for leaders despite poor governance outcomes. Therefore, social identity theory is particularly relevant in explaining the persistence of identity politics and its impact on leadership effectiveness in the region.

Institutional theory, associated with scholars such as Douglass C. North (1990) and Paul J. DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell (1983), shifts the focus from individual leaders to the

structural environment within which leadership operates. The theory posits that institutions defined as the formal and informal rules governing behavior shape incentives and constrain actions. In contexts where institutions are weak, poorly enforced, or politically manipulated, leaders are more likely to engage in opportunistic and self-serving behavior. In Sub-Saharan Africa, institutional weaknesses such as ineffective legal systems, weak regulatory frameworks, and limited accountability mechanisms create environments that enable leadership dysfunction to persist. Corruption, policy inconsistency, and governance inefficiency are therefore not merely individual failures but systemic outcomes reinforced by institutional structures. Institutional theory thus provides a powerful explanation for the persistence and normalization of dysfunctional leadership practices in the region.

Moral psychology theory, drawing from the works of Lawrence Kohlberg (1969), Albert Bandura (1999), and Linda K. Treviño (2006), focuses on how individuals make ethical decisions and justify their behavior. Central to this perspective are concepts such as moral development, moral disengagement, and ethical leadership. Moral disengagement, in particular, explains how individuals rationalize unethical behavior, thereby reducing feelings of guilt or responsibility. In the context of Sub-Saharan Africa, moral psychology helps explain how corruption and unethical leadership behaviors become normalized. Leaders may justify misconduct as necessary for political survival, while followers adapt to corrupt systems through acceptance or imitation. This creates a cycle in which unethical practices are perpetuated across institutions. The theory also highlights the role of ethical leadership in shaping organizational culture and promoting accountability. Where ethical leadership is absent, institutional trust declines, and governance systems become increasingly dysfunctional.

In sum, these four theories provide a multidimensional understanding of leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa. Transformational leadership theory highlights the absence of visionary and ethical leadership; social identity theory explains the influence of group-based loyalties on leadership dynamics; institutional theory reveals the structural conditions that sustain dysfunction; and moral psychology uncovers the ethical and cognitive processes that normalize poor leadership. Together, they offer a robust framework for analyzing leadership challenges and developing context-specific interventions aimed at improving governance and institutional effectiveness in the region.

Methodology

This study employed a narrative review approach using secondary data from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly publications, and institutional reports to examine leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa. A qualitative interpretive design was adopted, and relevant literature was sourced from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and JSTOR, as well as reports from organizations including the World Bank, Transparency International, and Afrobarometer. The inclusion criteria focused mainly on studies published between 2015 and 2025 that addressed leadership dysfunction, corruption, institutional weakness, identity politics, and ethical leadership within Sub-Saharan African contexts. Only English-language and relevant scholarly sources were included, while unrelated and non-scholarly materials were excluded. Data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring issues relating to governance and leadership challenges. The methodology was considered suitable because it enabled the integration of diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives across disciplines.

Literature Review

Organizational and Social Psychology Drivers of Leadership Dysfunction

Leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa can be more rigorously understood through the lenses of organizational and social psychology, which illuminate how individual behavior, group processes, organizational structures, and broader social systems interact to shape leadership outcomes. Evidence suggests that dysfunctional leadership is not merely a product of poor individual choices, but rather a systemic behavioral phenomenon embedded in organizational cultures, social identities, and institutional arrangements.

From an organizational psychology perspective, one of the most significant drivers of leadership dysfunction is the prevalence of toxic leadership traits, particularly narcissism, authoritarianism, and moral disengagement. Leaders with high narcissistic tendencies often exhibit excessive self-confidence, dominance, and a desire for admiration, which leads to centralized decision-making and resistance to feedback. Empirical studies show that toxic leadership is associated with reduced organizational performance, increased corruption, and employee disengagement (Ogunfowora et al., 2021; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). In many Sub-Saharan African public institutions, these traits are exacerbated by weak performance management systems and limited accountability structures, allowing dysfunctional behaviors to persist unchecked.

Closely related is the concept of ethical climate and organizational culture. Organizational psychology emphasizes that leadership behavior is shaped by the norms, values, and reward systems within institutions. In environments where corruption is normalized or where loyalty is rewarded over competence, leaders are more likely to engage in unethical practices. This aligns with evidence showing that Sub-Saharan Africa records an average Corruption Perceptions Index score of about 33/100, with nearly 90% of countries scoring below 50, indicating systemic governance challenges (Transparency International, 2024). Such environments create “behavioral contagion,” where unethical practices spread across organizational levels.

Another critical organizational factor is lack of accountability and weak institutional controls. The Mo Ibrahim Index of African Governance (2024) reports that 63.7% of Africa’s population live in countries where accountability and transparency have declined since 2014, reflecting weakening oversight mechanisms. Organizational psychology suggests that when monitoring systems are weak, individuals are more likely to engage in opportunistic behavior due to reduced perceived consequences (Bandura, 1999). This creates a permissive environment for leadership dysfunction.

From a social psychology perspective, leadership dysfunction is strongly influenced by group dynamics, social identity, and intergroup relations. One of the most prominent drivers is social identity theory, which explains how leaders and followers categorize themselves into in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In many Sub-Saharan African contexts, political leadership is shaped by ethnic, regional, or religious identities. This often leads to in-group favoritism, nepotism, and exclusion of minority groups, undermining meritocratic governance. Empirical studies on African politics confirm that ethnic-based voting and patronage remain dominant features of political systems (Cheeseman, 2015).

Asides, social psychological mechanism is groupthink, which occurs when cohesive decision-making groups prioritize consensus over critical evaluation. In political and bureaucratic settings, leaders often surround themselves with loyalists rather than experts, leading to poor

policy decisions and resistance to reform. Janis (1982) argues that groupthink results in illusion of invulnerability, suppression of dissent, and flawed decision-making, all of which are evident in many governance failures across the region.

Additionally, power distance, a core concept in cross-cultural psychology, plays a significant role. Sub-Saharan African societies generally exhibit relatively high power distance, meaning that hierarchical authority is accepted and rarely challenged (Hofstede, 2001). This cultural orientation discourages subordinates from questioning leaders, thereby reducing upward feedback and reinforcing authoritarian leadership styles. The result is a governance environment where accountability mechanisms are weak and leadership errors go uncorrected.

Social dominance theory further explains how elites maintain control over resources and power. Leaders with high social dominance orientation tend to support hierarchical systems and policies that preserve inequality (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This contributes to persistent socio-economic disparities and reinforces elite capture of state institutions. In such systems, leadership dysfunction becomes institutionalized, as leaders prioritize maintaining dominance over promoting inclusive development.

Cognitive processes also play a crucial role. Leaders are susceptible to cognitive biases, including overconfidence bias, confirmation bias, and self-serving bias, which distort decision-making. For example, overconfidence may lead leaders to pursue unrealistic economic policies, while confirmation bias causes them to ignore critical feedback or alternative perspectives. These biases are particularly problematic in environments lacking strong advisory systems or independent institutions.

Importantly, these psychological and organizational drivers do not operate in isolation but interact within broader structural conditions. Weak institutions amplify individual and group-level dysfunctions, while socio-cultural norms legitimize them. For instance, patronage networks (a socio-cultural factor) reinforce groupthink (a psychological factor), which in turn sustains weak institutional accountability (a structural factor). This interaction creates a self-reinforcing cycle of dysfunctional leadership. Empirical indicators further illustrate the consequences of these dynamics. Afrobarometer (2024) reports declining trust in key institutions, with trust in parliament falling to 37%, and trust in the presidency to 48% across surveyed countries. At the same time, economic and social pressures such as youth unemployment (approximately 8.9%) and high levels of vulnerable employment (over 70% of young workers) increase public dissatisfaction and strain governance systems (ILO, 2024). These conditions create fertile ground for both leadership dysfunction and political instability.

Figure 1: Organizational and Social Psychology Drivers of Leadership Dysfunction

Organizational and Social Psychology Drivers of Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa



Putting together, insights from organizational and social psychology reveal that leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa is a complex, multilevel phenomenon driven by toxic leadership traits, weak organizational systems, dysfunctional group dynamics, and socio-cultural norms that reinforce hierarchy and patronage. The persistence of these dynamics highlights the need for interventions that go beyond individual leadership training to include institutional reform, organizational culture change, and social norm transformation. Only through addressing these interconnected psychological and structural drivers can sustainable improvements in leadership and governance be achieved.

Empirical Indicators of Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa

Empirical evidence shows that leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa is quantifiable and widespread, with clear patterns across countries. The Mo Ibrahim Index (2024) indicates that 47.9% of Africa’s population live in countries where governance has declined, 63.7% experience reduced accountability and transparency, and 77.9% face worsening security conditions. These trends are evident in countries such as Nigeria and Democratic Republic of the Congo, where weak institutions and insecurity are pronounced.

Corruption remains deeply entrenched, with Sub-Saharan Africa recording an average Corruption Perceptions Index score of 33/100, and about 90% of countries scoring below 50 (Transparency International, 2024). This pattern is reflected in countries like Kenya and Ghana, while South Africa demonstrates persistent corruption despite stronger institutional frameworks.

Public trust in leadership is also declining. Afrobarometer (2024) reports that trust in parliament dropped from 52% to 33%, while trust in presidents declined from 60% to 48% across surveyed countries. In fragile states such as Somalia, leadership dysfunction is most severe, contributing to prolonged instability and weak governance structures. Overall, the data show that leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa is systemic, evidenced by declining governance indicators, high corruption levels, and reduced public trust, with varying intensity across countries.

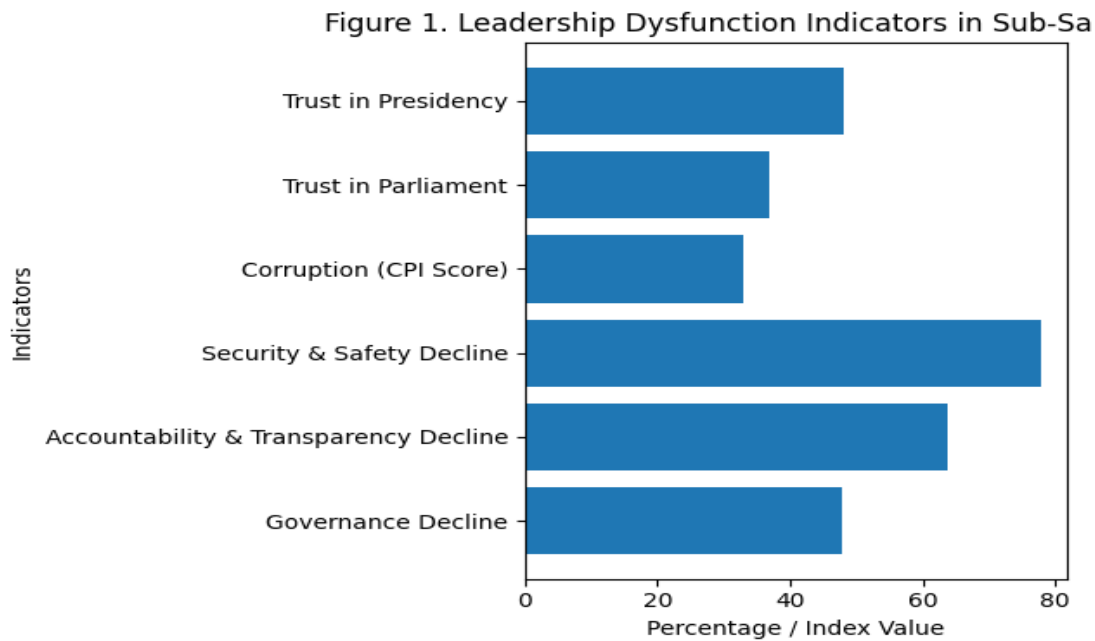
Table 1: Empirical Indicators of Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa

S/N	Indicator	Description	Value (%)	Source	Implications
1	Governance Decline	Population in countries with worsening governance (2014–2023)	47.9	Mo Ibrahim Index (2024)	Weak state capacity and policy inconsistency.
2	Accountability & Transparency Decline	Population in countries with declining accountability	63.7	Mo Ibrahim Index (2024)	Encourages corruption and elite capture.
3	Security & Safety Decline	Population in countries with declining security	77.9	Mo Ibrahim Index (2024)	Leads to conflict and economic disruption.
4	Corruption (CPI Score)	Regional corruption score	33	Transparency Int. (2024)	Indicates systemic corruption.
5	Trust in Parliament	Citizens who trust parliament	37	Afrobarometer (2024)	Weakens democratic legitimacy.
6	Trust in Presidency	Citizens who trust president	48	Afrobarometer (2024)	Reflects declining executive confidence.

Note. Values represent regional aggregates and perception-based indicators. Sources include Mo Ibrahim Foundation (2024), Transparency International (2024), and Afrobarometer (2024).

The table indicates a consistent pattern of institutional and governance decline across Sub-Saharan Africa. The high percentage of populations experiencing declining security (77.9%) and accountability (63.7%) highlights systemic weaknesses in leadership structures. Low corruption scores and declining public trust further suggest that leadership dysfunction is entrenched and affects both institutional performance and citizen perceptions. These indicators collectively demonstrate that governance challenges are multidimensional, involving structural, ethical, and legitimacy deficits.

Figure 2: Leadership Dysfunction Indicators in Sub-Saharan Africa



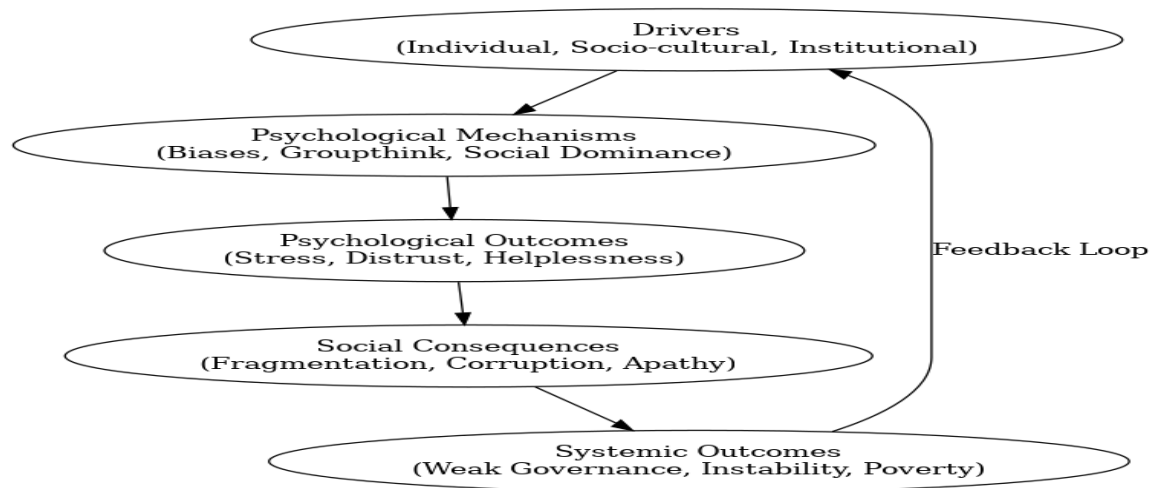
Consequences of Leadership Dysfunction

Closely related to this is the emergence of learned helplessness and reduced personal agency. When citizens repeatedly experience government failure, corruption, and unresponsiveness, they begin to feel powerless to influence outcomes. This perception is reflected in declining institutional trust across the region, where only about 37% of citizens express trust in parliament and approximately 48% trust the presidency (Afrobarometer, 2024). Such low levels of trust discourage civic engagement and reduce participation in democratic processes.

Another critical consequence is the erosion of trust, both in institutions and among individuals. Leadership dysfunction undermines confidence in governance systems, judicial processes, and public institutions. At the interpersonal level, it weakens social trust, making cooperation more difficult and increasing suspicion within communities. This decline in trust has significant implications for social cohesion and collective action, which are essential for development.

Leadership dysfunction also contributes to the normalization of corruption and broader ethical decline. In environments where leaders engage in corrupt practices without accountability, unethical behavior becomes normalized across society. With Sub-Saharan Africa recording an average Corruption Perceptions Index score of about 33 out of 100 (Transparency International, 2024), corruption is often perceived not as deviant behavior but as a necessary means of survival. This normalization erodes moral standards and reinforces systemic dysfunction.

Figure 3: Conceptual Model Showing Organizational and Social Mechanisms Consequences of Leadership Dysfunction



Source: Author's Ideas (2026)

Furthermore, widespread frustration and anger emerge as significant social consequences. High levels of unemployment and economic inequality contribute to this frustration. For instance, youth unemployment in the region stands at approximately 8.9%, while over 70% of young people are engaged in vulnerable or informal employment (ILO, 2024). These conditions create a sense of blocked opportunity, which often manifests in protests, aggression, or increased criminal behavior, consistent with frustration-aggression theory.

Leadership dysfunction also intensifies identity-based polarization and social fragmentation. Political leaders may exploit ethnic, religious, or regional divisions to maintain power, reinforcing in-group favoritism and out-group hostility. This weakens national unity and increases the likelihood of conflict, as social identity becomes a primary basis for political and economic competition.

In addition, there is a notable decline in collective efficacy and social capital. When leadership fails to deliver public goods or uphold fairness, citizens lose confidence in their ability to achieve shared goals. This reduces participation in community initiatives and weakens networks of cooperation. As a result, societies become less capable of mobilizing resources and coordinating efforts for development.

Finally, leadership dysfunction leads to widespread youth disillusionment, political apathy, and migration. With approximately 21.9% of young people not in employment, education, or training (ILO, 2024), many youths lose faith in the system and disengage from formal political processes. Others seek opportunities abroad, contributing to brain drain and the loss of human capital.

Overall, these psychological and social consequences are interconnected and self-reinforcing. Leadership dysfunction generates stress, distrust, and frustration, which in turn lead to disengagement, fragmentation, and reduced collective action. These outcomes further weaken institutions and perpetuate poor governance. Thus, leadership dysfunction is not only a political or economic issue but also a deep-rooted psychosocial challenge that affects the stability and development trajectory of Sub-Saharan African societies.

Strategies for Improving Leadership and Reducing Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa

Addressing leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa requires comprehensive and multidimensional strategies that integrate political reforms, institutional strengthening, psychological reorientation, organizational transformation, and ethical leadership development. Since leadership dysfunction in the region is influenced by structural, sociocultural, organizational, and psychological factors, sustainable solutions must address both individual leadership behaviour and the institutional environments within which leaders operate.

One major strategy involves strengthening institutional frameworks and accountability systems. Strong institutions such as independent judicial systems, anti-corruption agencies, electoral commissions, public service structures, and regulatory bodies are essential for promoting transparency, accountability, and good governance. Governments across Sub-Saharan Africa should improve institutional autonomy, enforce rule of law, strengthen policy implementation mechanisms, and ensure that public officials are held accountable for misconduct. Institutional reforms should also focus on reducing political interference, promoting merit-based appointments, and improving monitoring and evaluation systems within public organizations. Studies have shown that countries with stronger institutions and effective accountability mechanisms experience lower levels of corruption and better governance outcomes (Akinola & Soyemi, 2023; Transparency International, 2025).

Another important strategy is the promotion of ethical and transformational leadership. Leadership development programmes should emphasize integrity, emotional intelligence, accountability, empathy, service orientation, and ethical decision-making. Transformational leadership training can help leaders develop the capacity to inspire collective goals, promote institutional trust, and prioritize long-term societal development over personal interests. Ethical leadership education should also be integrated into schools, universities, civil service training, and political leadership programmes across the region. Indigenous African scholars have argued that value-based leadership and ethical reorientation are necessary for addressing corruption, abuse of power, and governance failures in Africa (Adeyemi, 2023; Ebegbulem, 2021).

Improving political inclusion and reducing identity-based politics is also critical for addressing leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many leadership crises in the region are sustained by ethnic favoritism, patronage systems, regional divisions, and identity politics. Governments and institutions should therefore promote national integration, inclusive governance, equal opportunities, and civic participation irrespective of ethnic, religious, or regional affiliations. Electoral reforms that encourage competence-based leadership selection rather than identity-based mobilization can also improve governance quality and institutional trust. Public enlightenment programmes and civic education initiatives should further promote tolerance, national unity, democratic values, and responsible citizenship.

At the organizational level, strengthening organizational culture and employee empowerment is essential for reducing toxic leadership and institutional inefficiency. Organizations should establish transparent administrative systems, ethical workplace policies, whistleblowing mechanisms, and fair reward systems that discourage corruption and abuse of authority.

Leadership selection and promotion within organizations should be merit-driven rather than influenced by favoritism or political loyalty. Furthermore, employee empowerment, participatory leadership, psychological safety, and effective communication should be encouraged to improve morale, productivity, and organizational commitment. Organizational psychology studies indicate that positive organizational climates and ethical leadership significantly reduce workplace deviance and improve institutional effectiveness (Nwankwo & Okafor, 2022).

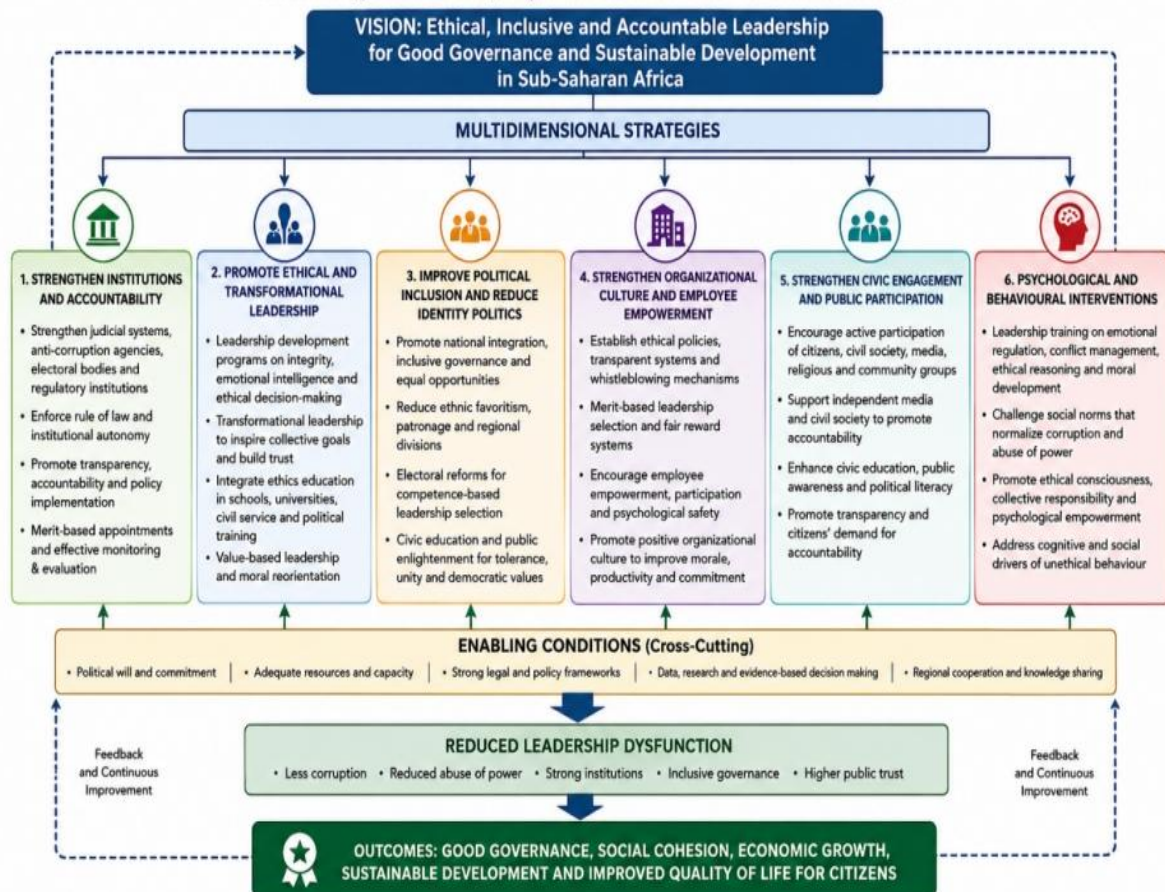
Another important strategy involves strengthening civic engagement and public participation in governance processes. Citizens, civil society organizations, the media, religious institutions, and community groups play critical roles in promoting accountability and monitoring leadership behaviour. Independent media and active civil society organizations can expose corruption, advocate for policy reforms, and encourage transparency within governance systems. Similarly, democratic participation and political awareness among citizens should be strengthened through civic education and public enlightenment campaigns. Afrobarometer reports consistently show that increased civic participation and public demand for accountability contribute positively to democratic governance and institutional responsiveness across African countries.

Finally, psychological and behavioural interventions are necessary for addressing the underlying cognitive and social factors sustaining leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa. Leadership training programmes should incorporate psychological components such as emotional regulation, conflict management, ethical reasoning, social responsibility, and moral development. There is also a need to challenge social norms that normalize corruption, abuse of power, and authoritarian leadership. Promoting ethical consciousness, collective responsibility, and psychological empowerment among citizens and leaders can contribute significantly to long-term governance transformation and institutional development across the region.

Figure 4: Model of Strategies for Improving Leadership and Reducing Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa

The figure below presents a multidimensional model for improving leadership and reducing leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa. The model integrates institutional strengthening, ethical leadership, political inclusion, organizational transformation, civic engagement, and psychological interventions as key strategies for promoting good governance and sustainable development.

Figure 4: Model of Strategies for Improving Leadership and Reducing Leadership Dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Researcher's Conceptualization (2026)

Key Components of the Model

- Strengthening institutional frameworks and accountability systems
- Promoting ethical and transformational leadership
- Improving political inclusion and reducing identity politics
- Strengthening organizational culture and employee empowerment
- Enhancing civic engagement and public participation
- Implementing psychological and behavioural interventions

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study underscore that leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa is not solely a structural or institutional failure but a multilevel phenomenon rooted in organizational and social psychological processes. By integrating insights from organizational psychology and social psychology, the study demonstrates that dysfunctional leadership is produced and sustained through the interaction of individual traits, group dynamics, socio-cultural norms, and institutional arrangements across countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa.

From an organizational psychology perspective, leadership dysfunction is closely associated with toxic leadership traits, including narcissism, authoritarianism, and moral disengagement. These traits shape leaders' behaviors, decision-making processes, and relationships with followers. In organizational settings where accountability systems are weak, such traits are not constrained but rather reinforced. This explains why leadership positions in many public institutions become associated with centralized control, suppression of dissent, and limited transparency. The empirical evidence showing that 63.7% of Africa's population live in countries with declining accountability and transparency (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2024) supports the argument that weak organizational controls create environments in which dysfunctional leadership behaviors can thrive.

From a social psychology perspective, leadership dysfunction is shaped by group processes and identity dynamics. Social Identity Theory explains how political leadership in countries like Kenya and Nigeria is often structured around ethnic or regional affiliations. Leaders tend to prioritize in-group interests, leading to patronage, nepotism, and unequal resource distribution. This undermines national cohesion and reinforces divisions within society. Additionally, high power distance, a common feature in many African societies, discourages subordinates from questioning authority, thereby reducing upward feedback and enabling authoritarian leadership styles. Another critical insight from social psychology is the role of social dominance orientation, which explains the tendency of elites to maintain hierarchical power structures. Leaders with high social dominance orientation are more likely to support systems that concentrate power and resources among a small elite, thereby perpetuating inequality and exclusion. This is evident in both fragile states such as Democratic Republic of the Congo and more stable democracies like South Africa, where inequality and elite control remain significant challenges.

Importantly, these organizational and social psychological processes are reinforced by cognitive mechanisms, including overconfidence bias, confirmation bias, and self-serving bias. These biases distort leaders' perceptions and decision-making, leading to unrealistic policy choices and resistance to evidence-based reforms. In environments lacking strong institutional checks, such biases are rarely corrected, allowing dysfunctional leadership patterns to persist over time.

The consequences of these processes are reflected in declining public trust and democratic engagement. Afrobarometer (2024) data showing that trust in parliament has fallen to 37% and trust in presidents to 48% illustrate the psychological impact of leadership dysfunction on citizens. As trust declines, citizens become disengaged from political processes, reducing accountability and further enabling poor leadership. This creates a self-reinforcing cycle, where weak leadership erodes trust, and reduced trust weakens the mechanisms needed to hold leaders accountable.

The findings also reveal that leadership dysfunction is context-dependent but structurally consistent across Sub-Saharan Africa. In fragile states such as Somalia, dysfunction manifests as institutional collapse and chronic insecurity. In relatively stable democracies such as Ghana, it appears as declining trust and governance inefficiencies. Despite these differences, the underlying drivers' weak institutional frameworks, entrenched corruption, identity-based politics, and limited accountability remain consistent across contexts.

Overall, the discussion highlights that leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa is best understood as a systemic behavioral and organizational problem, rather than a purely political or structural issue. Organizational and social psychological perspectives reveal how

dysfunctional leadership is produced, normalized, and sustained through everyday practices, beliefs, and institutional arrangements.

Policy Implications

Leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa requires a holistic policy response that integrates psychological, institutional, behavioral, and socio-cultural dimensions. Effective reforms should incorporate psychological competencies such as emotional intelligence, ethical reasoning, and self-regulation into leadership development, while also strengthening institutional frameworks to ensure accountability, transparency, and enforcement of sanctions. In addition, the use of behavioral interventions such as nudges, ethical reminders, and social norm strategies can help guide leaders toward more responsible decision-making. Equally important is the need to strengthen civic culture through education, citizen engagement, and value reorientation to challenge norms that tolerate corruption and patronage. Overall, sustainable improvement in leadership outcomes depends on aligning individual behavior, institutional effectiveness, and societal expectations.

Conclusion

This study concludes that leadership dysfunction in Sub-Saharan Africa is a systemic and multidimensional phenomenon, rooted in the interaction between individual psychological traits, socio-cultural dynamics, and institutional weaknesses. Empirical evidence demonstrates that governance decline, corruption, insecurity, and declining public trust are not isolated issues but interconnected outcomes of dysfunctional leadership systems. Insights from organizational and social psychology reveal that leadership dysfunction is sustained through toxic leadership traits, group dynamics such as identity-based politics and groupthink, and cognitive processes that normalize unethical behavior. These factors operate within weak institutional environments, creating a self-reinforcing cycle in which poor leadership weakens institutions, and weak institutions enable further leadership dysfunction. Importantly, while the intensity of dysfunction varies across countries from institutional fragility in Somalia to governance inefficiencies in South Africa the underlying drivers remain consistent. This suggests that leadership dysfunction in the region is not incidental but structurally embedded within governance systems.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this current study, the following are proposed:

1. Governments across Sub-Saharan Africa should prioritize reforms that enhance judicial independence, legislative oversight, and anti-corruption enforcement mechanisms. Given that 63.7% of the population live in countries with declining accountability, strengthening institutions is essential to constrain leadership excesses and promote responsible governance.
2. Electoral reforms should aim to reduce identity-based politics, patronage, and electoral malpractice, ensuring that leadership selection is based on competence and performance rather than ethnic or political loyalty. Strengthening electoral institutions will improve democratic accountability and legitimacy.
3. Governments should adopt open governance frameworks, including digital transparency platforms, public expenditure tracking, and freedom of information policies. Improved access to information will empower citizens to hold leaders accountable and reduce corruption.

4. Policy interventions should incorporate behavioral insights, such as anti-corruption nudges, ethics training, and bias-awareness programs, to address the psychological drivers of leadership dysfunction, including cognitive biases and groupthink. Of course, public institutions should implement organizational culture reforms that discourage corruption and reward merit, professionalism, and accountability. Establishing clear ethical standards and enforcement mechanisms will reduce the normalization of dysfunctional practices.

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