

Strategic Leadership and NGO Resilience in Zambia: A Post-Pandemic Contextual Model

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Abstract

This study investigated the role of strategic leadership in boosting the adaptive capacity of Zambian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) after the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Adaptive Leadership, Contingency, and Systems Theories, the research tested the Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership (CRASL) model based on data from a cross-sectional survey of 254 NGOs. The findings show that adaptive leadership responses and context-specific strategies play a more significant role in organizational resilience than individual leadership traits. The study emphasizes that leadership approaches rooted in contextual awareness, strategic flexibility, and organizational learning are essential for maintaining NGO performance in crisis-prone situations. These insights advance leadership and resilience theory and provide practical guidance for enhancing NGOs' capacity to deliver essential services amid uncertainty. The findings inform adaptive leadership theory and guide policy interventions to strengthen NGO resilience in crisis-prone contexts.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Adaptive Capacity, Organizational Resilience, NGOs, Zambia.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in late 2019, led to widespread disruptions in health systems, economies, and organizational operations worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). In Zambia, as in many developing countries, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were among the hardest hit, as movement restrictions and decreasing donor support limited their ability to provide essential services like healthcare, education, and community welfare (UNDP Zambia, 2020; Kapoor & Thakur, 2020). These disruptions revealed the fragility of the NGO sector and highlighted the need for adaptive and strategic leadership to maintain operations during crises.

Zambian NGOs, which often depend on external funding and donor networks, faced complex challenges during the pandemic, including decreased financial inflows, logistical barriers, and an unprecedented increase in service demand. The crisis compelled NGO leaders to respond swiftly, make critical decisions with limited information, and devise innovative strategies to continue supporting vulnerable populations. Effective leadership, particularly strategic leadership, has become key to managing these uncertainties (Hamel, 2020; Basit et al., 2022). Global experiences also demonstrate that leaders who embrace adaptability and make decisions based on specific contexts, such as responses within

institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (Zaccaria, 2021) and various African organizations (Takawira et al., 2022), are more effective in maintaining organizational resilience.

Within this context, strategic leadership in Zambia's NGO sector must strike a balance between operational continuity and organizational learning and adaptability. The pandemic offered an opportunity to re-examine leadership models, especially their relevance in low-resource environments. While existing research emphasizes the importance of leadership in crisis management (Farhan, 2022), there is limited empirical evidence on how strategic leadership principles enhance the adaptive capacity of African NGOs. This study draws on Adaptive Leadership, Contingency, and Systems Theories to investigate how strategic leadership can enhance NGO resilience in Zambia's post-pandemic environment.

Statement of the Problem

Although NGOs are vital to Zambia's socio-economic growth, their capacity to remain resilient during crises is not fully understood. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant weaknesses in leadership practices, particularly in strategic foresight, adaptability, and resource management. While existing research recognizes leadership as a crucial factor in resilience, it often ignores the specific challenges faced by African NGOs. Consequently, there is a gap in understanding how strategic leadership can lessen vulnerabilities and strengthen adaptive capacity in this sector. This study addresses that gap by developing and testing a leadership model tailored to the context of the Zambian NGO environment.

Research Objectives

This study seeks to:

1. Identify the strategic leadership dimensions that influence organizational adaptation among NGOs in Zambia.
2. Assess the key challenges that affect NGO adaptability in the post-pandemic context.
3. Analyze the strategic leadership responses that NGOs implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.
4. Determine the relationship between strategic leadership practices and organizational adaptive capacity.
5. Propose a contextually relevant strategic leadership model to enhance NGO resilience in Zambia.

Research Hypotheses

H1: Strategic leadership dimensions positively influence organizational adaptation among NGOs in Zambia.

H2: Organizational challenges such as financial instability and operational disruptions significantly impact adaptive capacity.

H3: Strategic leadership responses adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic substantially contribute to adaptive capacity in the post-pandemic period.

H4: Specific strategic leadership behaviors are positively linked to organizational adaptive capacity.

H5: A contextually relevant strategic leadership model improves post-pandemic adaptability among Zambian NGOs.

Literature Review

Strategic Leadership and Organizational Adaptability

Strategic leadership has increasingly been recognized as a crucial factor in organizational adaptability, especially in dynamic and uncertain environments (Boal & Hooijberg, 2001; Dinh et al., 2022). In the NGO sector, effective leadership extends beyond charisma and vision to include strategic flexibility, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive decision-making (Ngoma & Zulu, 2023). Recent research on African NGOs shows that organizations led by leaders who are attuned to their context and align actions with institutional realities tend to be more resilient and recover better after crises (Abdullahi, 2022; Moyo & Kunda, 2024). These results emphasize the need for leadership models that combine contextual awareness with adaptive behaviors instead of relying solely on universal management assumptions.

Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT)

Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT), developed by Heifetz et al. (2009), views leadership as a process of mobilizing individuals and organizations to address adaptive challenges. It emphasizes learning, experimentation, and collaborative problem-solving while navigating uncertainty. In NGOs, ALT helps explain how leaders support continuous adaptation through engagement and shared authority (Lusaka & Mbewe, 2022). However, ALT has been critiqued for its implicit assumption of autonomy and capacity, which may not exist in resource-limited or donor-dependent settings common among African NGOs (Chikonde, 2023). This limitation calls for a model that places adaptive behavior within systemic and institutional realities.

Contingency Theory (CT)

Contingency Theory (CT) proposes that leadership effectiveness depends on the alignment between a leader's style and situational factors like environment, structure, and resource constraints (Fiedler, 1967; Yukl, 2020). When applied to NGOs, CT explains why leadership strategies need to adapt based on external circumstances, such as donor priorities or regulatory policies (Mulenga & Banda, 2023). However, CT's rigidity has been criticized for not adequately capturing the ongoing and dynamic process of adaptation in complex settings (Osei-Tutu, 2024). In unpredictable NGO environments, effective leadership requires not only aligning with the situation but also ongoing learning—something CT alone does not fully provide.

Comparative Integration of Adaptive and Contingency Approaches

Both ALT and CT agree that effective leadership must respond to contextual realities, but they focus on different aspects. ALT describes the process of adaptation by emphasizing behavioral flexibility and learning, while CT concentrates on aligning with the environment, emphasizing fit. Combining these approaches offers a more comprehensive view of leadership in NGOs: ALT explains the mechanisms of change (“how” it happens), while CT clarifies the situational factors (“when” and “under what conditions” adaptation works). This combination forms the basis for the Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership (CRASL) model developed in this study.

CRASL: Bridging Theories Through Contextualization

The CRASL model builds on both ALT and CT by including adaptive leadership behaviors within the systemic constraints that impact NGO operations in Africa. CRASL defines adaptability not just as reactive adjustment but as a planned process of identifying vulnerabilities, mobilizing resources, and adjusting leadership practices to meet contextual needs. Unlike ALT, CRASL considers environmental constraints like donor dependency and governance fragility in leadership strategies. Unlike CT, it views context as dynamic and ever-changing rather than fixed. This dual foundation makes CRASL especially suitable for NGOs in the Global South, where leadership effectiveness depends on navigating uncertainty through both behavioral flexibility and systemic alignment (Mbewe & Ndlovu, 2023; Abor, 2024).

Recent Empirical Evidence from African NGO Studies (2022–2024)

Emerging research across sub-Saharan Africa highlights the practical benefits of CRASL’s integrated approach. Kiggundu and Adebayo (2022) showed that adaptive leadership practices, such as iterative decision-making and decentralized authority, improved NGO resilience in Nigeria and Uganda. Zimba et al. (2023) found that participatory leadership boosted organizational responsiveness to donor realignments in Zambia. Moyo and Kunda (2024) noted that leadership frameworks customized to local contexts outperformed imported managerial models during post-pandemic recovery. Overall, these studies emphasize the importance of leadership frameworks that combine adaptive behaviors with structural strategies fit.

Synthesis and Conceptual Gap

The literature shows that while both Adaptive and Contingency perspectives contribute to understanding leadership effectiveness, neither fully captures the realities of NGOs operating in resource-limited African contexts. Adaptive Leadership emphasizes learning but overlooks systemic constraints, while Contingency Theory considers context but lacks mechanisms for behavioral change. CRASL addresses this gap by combining adaptability and context-fit into a single model, presenting leadership as both a behavioral process and a way to align with the context. This combination provides a strong theoretical foundation

for understanding how strategic leadership enhances the adaptive capacity of NGOs in Zambia and similar environments across the Global South.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical foundation informs a conceptual structure composed of five interrelated constructs:

- i. **Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD):** Leadership traits such as vision, goal-setting, and strategic communication, rooted in ALT and tested in H1.
- ii. **Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV):** Financial fragility, governance weaknesses, and operational risks, grounded in STM and tested in H2.
- iii. **Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR):** Adaptive and proactive practices such as innovation, stakeholder engagement, and decision flexibility, derived from ALT and tested in H3.
- iv. **CRASL Model:** A contextual leadership framework based on CT, emphasizing fit between leadership practice and Zambian NGO realities, tested in H4.
- v. **Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC):** The dependent construct, reflecting the organization's ability to sustain operations, innovate, and recover from disruption.

The relationships among these constructs are summarized in Figure 1, which shows how leadership dimensions, challenges, and responses work together to improve organizational adaptive capacity.

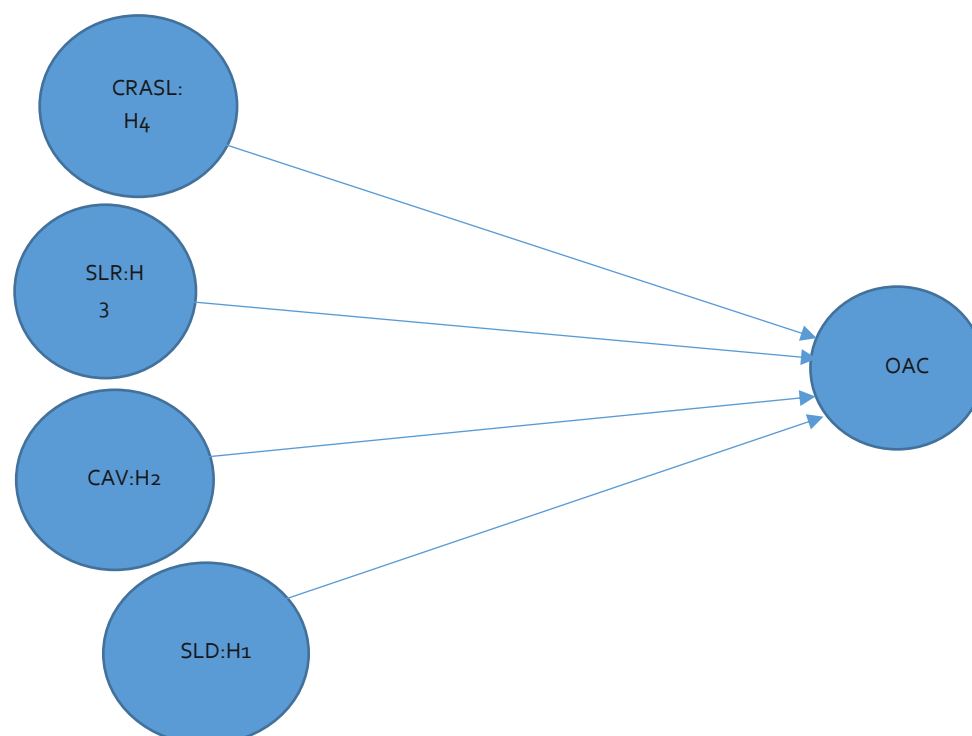


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study Showing the Relationship Between Strategic Leadership Constructs and Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC)

This framework illustrates that:

- i. **SLD → OAC (ALT perspective):** Strategic leadership traits enhance adaptability.
- ii. **CAV → OAC (STM perspective):** Managing vulnerabilities strengthens system stability.
- iii. **SLR → OAC (ALT perspective):** Adaptive responses improve resilience.
- iv. **CRASL → OAC (CT perspective):** Contextual leadership fit optimizes outcomes.

Collectively, these relationships emphasize the interplay of adaptive, contextual, and systemic factors in shaping NGO resilience, providing a coherent foundation for hypothesis testing.

Empirical Context and Contribution

Classical leadership research (House & Aditya, 1997; Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012) emphasizes visionary and charismatic traits as key drivers of performance. However, recent evidence indicates that in resource-limited settings, adaptability and learning from the environment are more important than fixed traits.

Within African NGOs, emerging scholarship underscores the role of adaptive, contextually grounded leadership in sustaining operations during crises. For example, Takawira et al. (2023) identified adaptive learning as a key mechanism of resilience among Zimbabwean NGOs. Amoako and Appiah (2022) demonstrated that participatory decision-making enhances innovation in Ghanaian nonprofits. Chilufya and Phiri (2023) linked locally tailored leadership to donor trust and sustainability in Zambia. Collectively, these studies affirm that leadership effectiveness depends on both contextual fit and adaptive responsiveness.

The CRASL model addresses these findings by incorporating adaptive and contingent principles into a leadership framework tailored for Zambia. It moves away from universalist models by emphasizing local decision-making and systemic coherence on how NGOs transform vulnerabilities into learning opportunities and resilience strategies.

Thus, this study contributes by:

- i. Advancing theoretical integration through the synthesis of ALT, CT, and STM.
- ii. Incorporating recent empirical evidence from African NGO contexts (2022–2024).
- iii. Developing and validating CRASL as a hybrid, contextually grounded leadership model for enhancing NGO adaptability in Zambia.

Methodology

Research Design and Philosophy

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to investigate the impact of strategic leadership on the adaptive capacity of Zambian NGOs in the post-COVID-19 era. The design enabled the collection of measurable and representative data on leadership practices, challenges, and resilience, while also including secondary data to improve validity through triangulation.

The research was grounded in positivism, emphasizing objectivity and the empirical measurement of observable relationships (Bryman, 2016). Recognizing the specific realities

of NGOs in Zambia, a post-positivist perspective was added to interpret statistical findings within a broader organizational context (Swanson & Holton, 2005). This balanced approach ensured both methodological rigor and sensitivity to context.

Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of 1,567 registered NGOs in Zambia, operating in the areas of health, education, environment, and social development. The organization served as the unit of analysis, with the primary respondents comprising CEOs, executive directors, and senior managers responsible for strategic decisions.

A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure sectoral representation and reduce bias. Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) formula at a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error, a minimum of 311 organizations was calculated. In total, 254 valid responses were collected between May and July 2024, yielding an 81.6% response rate. Secondary documents, including annual reports, audited financial statements, and donor evaluations (2019–2023), were also purposively sampled to support the survey results.

Data Collection and Instruments

A structured online questionnaire was administered to capture leadership practices and organizational adaptability. The instrument comprised four sections aligned with the study constructs:

- **Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC):** 6 items on flexibility and service continuity (e.g., "Our NGO can reconfigure operations during disruptions").
- **Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD):** 8 items on vision, goal-setting, and strategic communication.
- **Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV):** 7 items on financial strain, staffing, and governance risks.
- **Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR):** 9 items on decision adaptability, stakeholder engagement, and resource reallocation.

All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The online format offered efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and accessibility, especially considering the ongoing remote operations of some NGOs.

Secondary Data Integration

Secondary data were gathered from audited financial statements, annual reports, and donor assessment summaries to enhance the reliability of the findings. These documents provided objective indicators of financial stability, program effectiveness, and governance quality. Secondary metrics such as liquidity ratios, audit results, and donor ratings were statistically linked with survey-based CAV and OAC scales ($r = 0.25\text{--}0.40$), validating convergent validity and supporting the credibility of self-reported responses.

Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Data collection was done electronically, with biweekly follow-up reminders to boost participation. Respondents gave informed consent before accessing the questionnaire. The study received ethical approval from the University of Lusaka Research Ethics Committee (Ref: ULREC/2024/013). Participation was voluntary, and all data were kept confidential in accordance with research ethics protocols.

Validity and Reliability

Measurement properties were evaluated using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) with AMOS 25. The model demonstrated an acceptable fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.34$; CFI = 0.94; RMSEA = 0.056). All standardized loadings were above 0.60 ($p < .001$). Reliability and validity statistics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Reliability and Validity Summary

Construct		No. of Items	Cronbach's α	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD)		8	0.88	0.89	0.56
Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV)		7	0.81	0.84	0.52
Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR)		9	0.86	0.88	0.59
Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership (CRASL)		6	0.85	0.87	0.58
Organizational Capacity (OAC)	Adaptive	6	0.84	0.86	0.54

Note: All constructs show satisfactory internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.70$) and composite reliability (CR > 0.80), indicating acceptable reliability. Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values surpass the 0.50 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981), demonstrating convergent validity.

Cronbach's α values ranged from 0.81 to 0.88; CR values exceeded 0.80, and AVE values ranged from 0.52 to 0.61, surpassing the 0.50 threshold (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Discriminant validity was confirmed using the Fornell–Larcker and HTMT (< 0.85) criteria. No items needed removal, and full-collinearity VIFs remained below 3.3, indicating low common-method bias.

Addressing Bias and Triangulation

To minimize **self-report bias**, respondents were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. **Common method bias** was mitigated through procedural and statistical controls;

Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor accounted for 32% of the total variance.

Triangulation was achieved by integrating secondary evidence into the analysis:

- NGOs with strong financial audit ratings also exhibited higher OAC scores.
- Donor evaluation reports on governance quality corresponded with high SLR values.
- Annual reports demonstrating innovation and program flexibility supported the survey-based inference that adaptive leadership enhances resilience.

This integration provided independent verification that the statistical relationships derived from survey data reflect observable organizational performance patterns.

Limitations

Despite its rigor, the study faced limitations inherent in cross-sectional surveys, which limit the ability to make causal inferences. Internet-based data collection may have excluded NGOs with limited internet access, and self-reported responses could be subject to perceptual bias. Nevertheless, stratified sampling, a high response rate, and multiple-source triangulation collectively improved credibility and external validity.

Summary

This methodology provides a robust empirical foundation for understanding how strategic leadership practices impact NGO resilience in resource-constrained settings. The use of validated survey tools, secondary data verification, and transparent ethical procedures increases the reliability, reproducibility, and policy relevance of the results.

Results

This section presents the statistical findings from analyses examining the effects of Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD), Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV), Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR), and the Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership Model (CRASL) on Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC). Results are reported based on descriptive, correlational, and regression analyses.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables (N = 254)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	M	SD	Skewness	SE	Kurtosis	SE
OAC	1.00	5.00	3.72	0.95	-0.59	0.15	-0.12	0.30
SLD	1.17	5.00	3.64	0.76	-0.19	0.15	0.21	0.30
CAV	1.00	5.00	3.15	0.96	-0.38	0.15	-0.50	0.30
SLR	1.00	5.00	3.70	0.94	-0.56	0.15	-0.01	0.30
CRASL	1.40	5.00	3.82	0.74	-0.37	0.15	0.59	0.30

Source: Author's SPSS Output (2024)

The descriptive statistics (see Table 2) indicate moderately high mean scores for Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC), Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR), and Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership (CRASL), reflecting strong perceptions of adaptability and broad endorsement of contextually grounded leadership practices among respondents. In particular, OAC ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.95$), SLR ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.94$), and CRASL ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.74$) registered the highest mean values, suggesting that NGO leaders perceived themselves as capable of maintaining resilience and applying localized strategic approaches during and after the COVID-19 crisis.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Pearson's Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. OAC	1.00				
2. SLD	0.45**	1.00			
3. CAV	0.34**	-0.09	1.00		
4. SLR	0.74**	0.58**	0.16*	1.00	
5. CRASL	0.64**	0.41**	0.14*	0.56**	1.00

Note. $p < .01$ (two-tailed); $p < .05$.

Source: Author's SPSS Output (2024)

The results in Table 3 show that all independent variables were positively correlated with OAC, with the strongest relationship observed for SLR ($r = .74$, $p < .01$). None of the correlation coefficients exceeded .80, indicating no multicollinearity concerns.

Multicollinearity Test

Table 4: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Results

Variable	Tolerance	VIF
SLD	0.60	1.66
CAV	0.92	1.09
SLR	0.20	4.90
CRASL	0.65	1.54

Source: Author's SPSS Output (2024)

All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values, as shown in Table 4, were below the accepted threshold of 10, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity among the predictor variables and confirming the statistical independence of the constructs included in the regression model.

Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Table 5: Hierarchical Regression Predicting Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC)

Step	Predictors	ΔR^2	β (Std.)	p
1	Controls (size, age, sector)	.05	—	ns
2	SLD	.02	0.06	.297
3	CAV	.07	0.22	< .001
4	SLR	.29	0.51	< .001
5	CRASL	.23	0.40	< .001

Final Model: $R^2 = .668$; Adjusted $R^2 = .653$; $F(5, 248) = 97.20$, $p < .001$

Source: Author's SPSS Output (2024)

Table 5 shows that SLR contributed the most to the additional variance in OAC ($\Delta R^2 = .29$), followed by CRASL ($\Delta R^2 = .23$). CAV had a smaller but still significant contribution ($\Delta R^2 = .07$), while SLD was positive but not statistically significant.

Regression Coefficients

Table 6: Regression Model Summary and Coefficients

Predictor	β	SE	t	p
(Constant)	-0.58	0.24	-2.47	.014
SLD	0.06	0.06	1.05	.297
CAV	0.22	0.04	5.75	< .001
SLR	0.51	0.05	9.96	< .001
CRASL	0.40	0.06	6.88	< .001

Model Fit: $R^2 = .668$; Adj. $R^2 = .662$; Durbin–Watson = 2.01; $F = 124.99$, $p < .001$

Source: Author's SPSS Output (2024)

As presented in Table 6, the regression model explained 66.8% of the variance in Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC), demonstrating strong explanatory power and confirming the model's robustness for behavioral and organizational research.

Discussion

This section discusses the results in relation to the study's hypotheses, theoretical foundations, and empirical context. The discussion incorporates Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT), Contingency Theory (CT), and Systems Theory of Management (STM) to explain how strategic leadership practices impact the resilience of NGOs.

Hypothesis Testing and Model Interpretation

Table 7: Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	SLD positively influences OAC	Not Supported
H2	CAV positively influences OAC	Supported
H3	SLR positively influences OAC	Supported
H4	CRASL positively influences OAC	Supported

As shown in Table 7, the results of hypothesis testing clearly demonstrate the relationships among the study variables. H₁, which suggested that Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD) positively influence Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC), was not supported. This indicates that leadership traits such as vision and goal-setting alone do not significantly boost adaptability among NGOs. Conversely, H₂, H₃, and H₄ were supported, confirming that Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV), Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR), and the Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership Model (CRASL) all have significant positive effects on OAC. Among these, SLR showed the strongest predictive power, highlighting the importance of proactive, adaptive leadership behaviors in building resilience. Overall, these findings suggest that practical, context-sensitive leadership practices rather than traditional leadership qualities are the main factors driving NGO adaptability in the Zambian context.

Regression Interpretation and Theoretical Integration

The regression equation is expressed as:

$$OAC = -0.584 + 0.061(SLD) + 0.216(CAV) + 0.513(SLR) + 0.396(CRASL) + \varepsilon$$

The results show that Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR) and CRASL were the strongest predictors of NGO adaptability, while CAV had a moderate yet significant impact, and SLD stayed statistically insignificant.

These findings collectively support the idea that adaptive leadership actions and contextually based frameworks, rather than traditional leader traits, are the primary drivers of NGO resilience. This expands Adaptive Leadership Theory by placing its ideas within Zambia's institutional realities, specifically donor dependence and limited resource flexibility.

Discussion by Variable

Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC)

Zambian NGOs showed moderate to high adaptability ($M = 3.72$, $SD = 0.95$). This supports Tushman and O'Reilly (1996), who state that adaptability is key to organizational survival. In this case, adaptability was influenced more by leadership decisions and resource allocation than by technological progress.

Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD)

The insignificant effect of SLD ($\beta = 0.06$, $p > .05$) suggests that vision and goal articulation, although valuable, did not directly enhance adaptability without the support of additional resources. This question tests Trait Theory's assumption of universal effectiveness (Den Hartog & Belschak, 2012) and supports Chen and Zhang's (2018) claim that leadership must align with contextual factors. Therefore, H₁ was not supported.

Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV)

CAV significantly predicted OAC ($\beta = 0.22, p < .001$), supporting H2. This highlights the importance of recognizing and strategically managing vulnerabilities to improve resilience. As Martinez and Rodriguez (2017) note, challenges can act as catalysts for adaptive learning. In Zambia, financial constraints and donor dependency, rather than technological limitations, were the main stressors.

Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR)

SLR emerged as the most potent predictor ($\beta = 0.51, p < .001$), confirming that proactive decision-making and stakeholder coordination are key to resilience. This finding extends the work of Wenzel et al. (2020) and Rehman et al. (2023) by highlighting that tangible leadership responses outweigh charismatic influence in crisis contexts. Thus, H3 was supported.

CRASL Framework

CRASL also significantly influenced OAC ($\beta = 0.40, p < .001$), confirming the importance of context-specific leadership frameworks and supporting Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967). As a result, H4 was validated. The evidence suggests that locally grounded models outperform generalized global templates in terms of NGO effectiveness.

Proposed Model: Zambian NGO Strategic Leadership Model for Adaptability (ZN-SLAM)

Drawing on regression evidence, the study proposes ZN-SLAM as a four-pillar model integrating theory and practice:

- i. **Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR):** Quick decision-making, stakeholder involvement, and innovation as key adaptive forces.
- ii. **Contextually Relevant Leadership (CRASL):** Frameworks that align leadership actions with Zambia's institutional realities.
- iii. **Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV):** Identifying and managing risks as opportunities for learning.
- iv. **Strategic Leadership Dimensions (SLD):** Fundamental vision and communication that support, but do not solely guarantee, adaptability.

ZN-SLAM extends CRASL into a flexible framework for Africa. It offers a clear path for NGOs to develop adaptive leadership, thereby boosting operational continuity and resilience amid systemic uncertainty.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This section summarizes the study's main findings, discusses their implications for theory, practice, and policy, and provides targeted recommendations for NGO leaders, policymakers, and researchers. It also emphasizes the study's originality, its contributions to leadership and resilience theory, limitations, and directions for future research.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of strategic leadership on the adaptive capacity of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Zambia following the COVID-19 pandemic. Using data from 254 NGOs analyzed with descriptive and inferential statistics, the research validated that Strategic Leadership Responses (SLR) and the Contextually Relevant and Actionable Strategic Leadership (CRASL) framework are the primary predictors of Organizational Adaptive Capacity (OAC).

Results indicated that while Zambian NGOs maintained moderate adaptive capacity, traditional leadership traits such as vision and decisiveness did not significantly predict resilience. In contrast, adaptive leadership behaviors ($\beta = 0.513$, $p < .001$) and contextually grounded leadership frameworks ($\beta = 0.396$, $p < .001$) played a key role in strengthening organizational stability. Furthermore, Challenges and Vulnerabilities (CAV), when strategically managed, also positively contributed to adaptability ($\beta = 0.216$, $p < .001$).

Consequently, three key insights emerge. First, adaptive and context-specific practices outperform traditional, trait-based leadership models. Second, the CRASL model offers empirical support for a localized, evidence-based leadership framework in African NGO settings. Third, these insights form the basis of the Zambian NGO Strategic Leadership Adaptability Model (ZN-SLAM), which combines Adaptive Leadership, Contingency, and Systems theories to enhance organizational resilience. Therefore, strengthening NGO leadership is not just a managerial need but a societal obligation that guarantees the ongoing provision of vital community services during crises.

Theoretical Implications

Theoretically, this study expands Adaptive Leadership Theory (Heifetz et al., 2009) by showing that adaptability comes not only from individual leader efforts but also from institutionalized, context-specific leadership mechanisms. By incorporating Contingency Theory (Fiedler, 1967) and Systems Theory into the framework, CRASL provides a multidimensional explanation of NGO resilience that considers both human and structural dynamics.

The findings also challenge Trait Theory by showing that leadership effectiveness relies less on personal qualities and more on practical strategies that match the specific context. As a result, this study highlights African NGOs as active contributors to global leadership conversations, emphasizing the importance of indigenous models in expanding established theories.

Practical Implications

For practitioners, the findings highlight the importance of institutionalizing adaptive leadership. Since SLR emerged as the strongest predictor of OAC, NGOs should invest in leadership development programs that enhance skills in rapid decision-making, stakeholder engagement, and financial flexibility. Likewise, managing CAV effectively can turn vulnerabilities into opportunities for organizational learning and adaptation.

Additionally, integrating the CRASL framework into organizational governance and performance assessment tools can help NGOs formalize adaptive behaviors and maintain resilience over time. Therefore, adaptive leadership should be viewed as a strategic capability essential for informed decision-making, effective resource management, and effective stakeholder engagement.

Policy Implications

At the policy level, the study emphasizes the need for integrated leadership frameworks within national NGO governance systems. Government agencies and umbrella organizations should integrate CRASL principles into accreditation, capacity-building, and monitoring programs. Donors should adopt flexible funding mechanisms that encourage leadership adaptability and responsiveness to their specific contexts.

Additionally, policy institutions can utilize the ZN-SLAM model to set sector-wide benchmarks for leadership effectiveness and adaptive capacity, thereby boosting overall resilience within the nonprofit ecosystem.

Recommendations

Based on empirical results and theoretical synthesis, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. **Enhance Leadership Training:** Develop targeted training programs emphasizing adaptive decision-making, strategic flexibility, and collaborative problem-solving.
- ii. **Strengthen Financial Resilience:** Implement diversified funding strategies informed by CAV analysis, including contingency reserves and digital financial management tools.
- iii. **Institutionalize CRASL:** Integrate CRASL into NGO governance policies, leadership evaluations, and succession planning to sustain organizational adaptability.
- iv. **Foster Cross-Sectoral Collaboration:** Promote partnerships among NGOs, government agencies, and donors to strengthen system-wide crisis preparedness.
- v. **Implement Continuous Monitoring:** Establish ongoing performance and adaptability tracking systems to support evidence-based decision-making and timely strategic adjustments.

Originality and Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes four significant contributions:

- i. **Empirical Innovation:** It provides the first hypothesis-driven validation of a locally grounded NGO leadership model (CRASL) in Zambia.
- ii. **Theoretical Advancement:** It challenges universal leadership assumptions, emphasizing adaptability and contextual responsiveness as core determinants of resilience.

- iii. **Model Transferability:** The ZN-SLAM framework offers a scalable leadership model applicable across African NGO contexts.
- iv. **Reframing Africa's Role:** It positions African NGOs as theoretical innovators, advancing leadership and resilience scholarship beyond Western paradigms.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings are solid, the study's scope was limited to Zambia, which may affect its broader applicability. Still, the contextual fit improves its relevance to similar sub-Saharan settings. Relying on self-reported survey data may introduce bias; however, using organizational reports to cross-check helped confirm the accuracy of the responses. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to draw causal conclusions, indicating a need for longitudinal studies to examine evolving leadership dynamics.

Future Research Directions

To extend this work, future studies should:

- i. Replicate and test the CRASL and ZN-SLAM frameworks across different African regions.
- ii. Conduct longitudinal and mixed-method studies to assess leadership effectiveness over time.
- iii. Explore the integration of digital transformation and technological tools in adaptive leadership practices.
- iv. Examine the influence of organizational culture and gender dynamics on adaptive leadership and resilience outcomes.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting this study's findings are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Disclosure of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this study.

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