Volunteer public leaders’ values-driven leadership: the case of village elders in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

Village eldership, though a voluntary and non-salaried position, plays a crucial role in public leadership in Kenya. The choice of village elders has to be done in line with expected roles but guided, importantly, by the values needed for the office. Generally, some values (such as altruism, solidarity, reciprocity, equity, social justice, among others) are considered distinctive to active volunteers as they influence their outcomes and prosocial behaviour variation. The purpose of this study was to establish the relevance of values in volunteer leadership in the public sector in Kenya, and specifically focused on village elders. Thirty respondents (composed of village elders, chiefs and community members) were purposively chosen to participate in this qualitative study. The study, which was guided by the servant leadership framework, revealed that peace, respect, harmonious living, relationships, justice, honesty, and hard work are important values for volunteer leadership. These values influenced the village elders' attributable contribution, guided them in decision-making, and earned them respect while also providing them with the mandate to lead. The study contributes to the field of volunteerism by highlighting the place of values in public service leadership in Kenya, and in relation to village elders.

1. Introduction

In Kenya, village elders are non-salaried officials of the provincial administration, who though serving voluntarily, command a significant influence within their territories and sit in most public committees (Andreassen and Barasa, 2013; Gisore et al., 2012; Ontita and Chitere, 2015; Ontita, 2015). According to Ontita and Chitere (1991), village elders play a significant leadership role with the potential of influencing village members since they have similar personal characteristics to those of their followers. Specifically, Gisore et al. (2012) observed that village elders are instrumental when introducing quick but effective interventions in villages in Kenya as they interact with ease with fellow community members. Village elders are chosen from among community members depending on the length of time lived in the community, knowledge of the community members, familiarity with the area, integrity, and educational level (Mbuba and Mugambi, 2011).

Ontita (2007) argued that the presence and strength of village eldership in Kenya vary from one region to another depending on the historical importance of the position. In some parts of Kenya, for example, village elders stand unchallenged as genuine leaders with the potential of influencing villagers to undertake development-related projects. As volunteer public service leaders, village elders in Kenya are expected to demonstrate and be guided by values relevant to their work such as commitment, altruism, social justice, community service, among others. However, there is dearth of studies focused on village elders in Kenya (Ontita, 2015), and more so those that are focused on volunteer values.

It has been established that volunteers are predominantly the strength of advisory boards in institutions of higher learning where they provide social, financial, and human capital (Nehls and Nagai, 2013). Further, Pelayo (2013) highlighted that volunteers in leadership positions wield significant influence in the decision-making process making a substantial contribution from their experience and knowledge. While volunteers are said to avoid leadership positions (Pearce, 1980), those who accept the responsibility, lack authority inherent in paid leadership positions (Bowers, 2012), and without traditional forms of authority and motivation, volunteer leaders are expected to connect with followers in innovative ways to be successful (Posner, 2015).

In Kenya, volunteerism has been covered in literature in relation to aspects such as student volunteerism, formal and informal volunteerism, among others. For students in Kenya, Lwembe (2008) observed that volunteerism contribute to gaining employability skills which are crucial...
in secreting employment. Lough and Mati (2012) argued that using young volunteers can be an effective solution to perennial conflict in East Africa, such as the post-election violence that was witnessed in 2007/08 in Kenya. In their empirical research in Korogocho Slum in Nairobi, Kenya, Lewis (2015) found out that study participants viewed volunteering as lowly-paid jobs owing to the stipends given for the volunteer work they were doing. This was especially due to the fact that many Kenyans are unemployed and often have to do many menial tasks which are low-paying.

However, despite the importance and influence of village elders in rural development in Kenya (Andreasen and Barasa, 2013; Gisore et al., 2012; Omtita, 2015), this group of public service volunteers is largely understudied. The current study in an attempt to fill this gap, utilized the servant leadership framework in an effort to get more insight on the relevance of values in volunteer leadership in the public sector in Kenya.

2. Values and volunteering

Generally values are considered to be standards of behaviour by which one decides to live (Mintz, 2018) defined values as fundamental beliefs that provide guidelines for a person’s conduct including attitudes and actions, and are perceived as criteria for judgment, preference, and choice (Rokeach, 2008). Studies have shown that some values are distinctive to active volunteers and influence volunteer outcomes (Benson, 2010), and prosocial behaviour variation (Cnaan and Cascio, 1998). Furthermore, Sundeen and Roskoff (1995) noted that values are important determinants in volunteering and efforts to encourage community services should acknowledge the role that values play in prosocial behaviour. Values are important expectations of volunteering and they assist volunteer leaders to influence followers effectively. Leaders who engender prosocial values are likely to be more engaged with volunteer work (Shantz et al., 2014). This therefore suggests that one important area of focus for volunteers is the values they espouse.

According to Wilson and Musick (1999), volunteering is an expression of people’s identity and values, with distinctive values of volunteers being moulded by early life experiences, education, religious beliefs, and occupation. Values, a common component to all faiths, shape community volunteering traditions, and are underpinned in many cultures by religion (Graham et al., 2013; Rochester et al., 2016). Relatedly, Reed and Selbee (2000) identified spiritual fulfilment, religion, and the value placed on community service as being positively related to volunteering while material success and professional satisfaction are negatively related. Chiariello (2008) posited that volunteer leaders appeared to work diligently at building trust with their followers and providing them social support, suggesting that volunteer leaders have their followers’ interest at heart.

Rochester et al. (2016) identified 4 sets of values that influence volunteering: the principle of altruism which is based on the moral imperative of compassion and care for others; the idea of solidarity which involves identification with a group and responsibility to their well-being; reciprocity which advances the understanding that helping others may lead to receiving help when in need; values of equity and social justice based on the belief that inequality and injustice are morally and socially wrong and should be addressed. As village elders in Kenya lead based on delegated authority from the chiefs (Gisore et al., 2012), it is expected that they will demonstrate values such as altruism, social justice, and work in unity with fellow village mates dealing with societal issues.

Selection of leaders at all level of governance is often pegged on particular (overt or covert) qualities. Various leadership qualities have been advocated for in literature, such as commitment (Eijaz et al., 2008); problem-solving, strategic decision-making and communication (Meng et al., 2012); personal qualities such as maturity, strength of character, common sense, trustworthiness, etc (Gujral, 2012). More recently, Alfogahaa and Jones (2020) has argued that qualities needed for leaders especially in a conflict situation include being visionary, non-violence influence, and tolerance. Relatedly, as most African cultures are religious in orientation (Mbiti, 2015; Ngunjiri, 2010), the quality of being religious is held in high esteem among leaders in the continent. The foregoing discussion suggests that public service leaders such as village elders are expected to exhibit some qualities as they lead their people.

Similarly, public service leaders are also expected to embody particular values as they go about their duties. Lord and Brown (2001) observed that values govern the behaviour of leaders as well as those they lead within the organization. Values, such as being ethical, are often discussed alongside leadership qualities, and are essential for leaders as practitioners (Meng et al., 2012). According to Rochester et al. (2016) values are embedded in the religious beliefs of most cultures, which in some cases are interconnected. For public leaders in the African culture, values are ingrained in their religious and cultural backgrounds (Mbiti, 2015).

Relatedly, values do influence how leaders execute their mandates. For example, according to (Russell, 2001), values affect servant leaders not just in their behaviour but also their organizational performance. The foregoing author noted that values anchor the servant leadership approach. Effective leaders should value their followers through interactions and expectations they have of them (Shravastava et al., 2014), which consequently leads to organizational excellence. Value-based leadership has been strongly linked to spirituality at work, which is also related to effectiveness among organizational employees (Della Corte et al., 2017).

3. Servant leadership framework

There has been an increased interest in servant leadership due to the current demand for more ethical, people-centred management in complex organizations (Van Dierendonck, 2011) leading to the adoption of the style by leaders in different contexts (Boone and Makhani, 2012). Servant leadership framework, which is attributed to Robert Greenleaf and introduced into leadership studies in 1970, argues that for a servant leader, the desire to serve precedes aspiration to lead (Greenleaf, 1977). As such, servant leaders are said to invest in the development and well-being of others to accomplish tasks and goals for the common good, incorporating the ideals of empowerment, total quality, team building, participatory management, and the service ethic into a leadership philosophy (Page and Wong, 2000).

Stone and Patterson (2005) observed that servant leadership style relies upon the influence of self-giving without self-glory, enhancing job performance and commitment to the organization and encouraging service to the community (Liden et al., 2008). Similarly, Beck (2014) showed that the length one was in a leadership position and the consistency in volunteering, influenced servant leadership. Further, servant leaders influence others through: building trusting relationships; demonstrating an altruistic mind set; and possessing interpersonal competence. Patterson (2003) highlighted love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment and service as important values held by servant leaders, which are also the hallmarks of servant leaders (Erdur, 2019).

Servant leadership framework is useful in examining values that village elders espouse in their leadership. Village elders in Kenya being volunteer leaders work for the betterment of their villages, and are involved in servant-related tasks such as conflict resolution, development projects, etc (Gisore et al., 2012). It has been argued that volunteer leaders are more concerned with the development of people, engage in inspiring leadership behaviours, even more than paid leaders, and are more psychologically involved by demonstrating values that promote independent thought and challenge (Benson, 2010; Catano et al., 2001; Posner, 2015). Servant leadership model has also been associated with motivations to volunteer (Erdur, 2019), as well as leadership in African culture (Wanasika et al., 2011). The servant leadership framework was therefore found relevant to the aim of the study, and to the specific study objectives given in the next section.
4. Objectives of the study

Focusing on the village elders, the study sought to establish the relevance of values in volunteer leadership in Kenya’s Public Sector. Specifically, the study was guided by the following objectives:

i. To establish the qualities that are considered in the selection of village elders in Kenya
ii. To understand the values that are considered essential for volunteer leaders in the public sector in Kenya in relation to village elders
iii. To investigate how values influence village elders’ leadership.

5. Methodology

This study utilized qualitative exploratory methods to investigate the role of values in volunteer leadership in Kenya’s Public Sector. Qualitative research design was chosen for its orientation in analysing concrete cases in their temporal and local particularity (Flick, 2018), and the potential of yielding deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Exploratory method was used because it is appropriate for understandings new phenomenon and discovering new ideas (Saunders et al., 2016; Patton, 2015). Additionally, this design was useful for it was flexible allowing a holistic understanding of the interviewees’ perspective and context.

As most qualitative studies orient themselves to a purposive sampling (Cresswell, 2015), Nyamira South Sub-county was purposively chosen out of five sub-counties of Nyamira County due to the diversity of the inhabitants resulting from its urban and rural catchment, and the researcher’s access. Within Nyamira South Sub-County, two wards were purposively selected for the study so as to include one in the rural area (Nyanza) and one in the urban set-up (Township). Study participants included ten village elders, seven chiefs, and thirteen community members. The two wards had seven chiefs who supervised the village heads and who were included in the study. The chiefs were requested to nominate outstanding village elders who could communicate fluently in English (Most of village elders have low levels of education and in the two wards only ten of them could communicate in English). It was important for the study to be done in English to limit reliance on third parties for communication and to avoid misrepresentation of facts likely to happen during interpretation. For community members, those who interacted closely with the village heads, could communicate in English and were mainly households’ leaders or advisers of the Nyumba Kumi initiative, (a composition of ten houses informally established for accountability purposes) were thirteen, and these formed the FGD.

The data collection, which was conducted between March 2019 and January 2020, was through interviews with chiefs and village elders, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with community members. FGDs were held with community members who provided their view of the village elders’ roles. The community members in the two wards (one session per ward), were given an opportunity to share their feelings, experiences and perceptions of the village elders. The researcher explained to each of the participants’ details of the study and each one of them signed a consent form to participate in the study upon understanding the purpose of the study. All the interviews and FGDs were voice recorded on phone; Huawei GR5 2017 phone and Samsung J4 Plus models. In addition, notes were taken to supplement the recorded responses which also formed part of the collected data for this study.

Triangulation of data collection methods was used to enhance the trustworthiness of this study (Cohen et al., 2007; Mills, 2014). The village elders shared their experiences in the role, while the chiefs provided information on their engagement with village elders as their supervisors (Gisore et al., 2012) and community members gave feedback on their relationship with the village elders in focus group discussions. Transcribed data was analysed using ATLAS qualitative analysis software for systematic organization, coding and visualization. To this end, thematic analysis was adopted following Braun and Clarke (2006) recommendations. The six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) and echoed by other scholars such as Vaismoradi et al. (2013) as well as Kiger and Varpio (2020) were adopted in this study. In line with these steps, we i) first familiarized ourselves with emerging data, ii) developed initial codes from the data, iii) searched for themes, iv) reviewed emergent themes v) defined and named themes (as per the study objectives) and vi) produced this report in line with the three study objectives.

Regarding ethics, the researcher ensured informed consent was obtained from the study participants, and that confidentiality as well as anonymity for participants was guaranteed. On ethical code follower, the aim of the research was explained to the participants, and they were informed of their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research at any point as they so wished. In case of any arising question, participants were told whom to contact (in this case the first author). Finally, ethical clearance was obtained from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI), the Kenyan body in charge of ethics in research. The permit number given for this study was NACOSTI/P/19/75284/28956.

6. Findings and discussion

6.1. Qualities considered in the selection process of village elders

Diverse qualities were highlighted as being important during the selection of village elders. Most of the village elders in the study asked why they think they were chosen to the position, highlighted personal qualities such as character, honesty, good conduct, humility, truthfulness, trust worthiness, tolerance, a well-managed family and sobriety (not consuming illicit brew). Further, they also mentioned qualities that were related to the role including fairness (listening to both sides), good relationship with the community members and availability. It was apparent that religion was a central quality as one village elder observed:

I normally interact with people and when I talk to them in the Christian way...Let us say when there is conflict, when I try to handle that case I normally start with a word of prayer, at times I quote a verse to bring them to understand exactly what we are talking about...My Christianity has assisted me so much in this leadership. I employ Christian values in some of the cases. Because the Bible has got so many verses about conflict.

(A 59-year-old Village Elder)

The chiefs and community members seemed to have high expectations for the village elders and set a high moral threshold for those holding the position. While education was not a major consideration, qualities such as character, faithfulness, trustworthiness, integrity, sobriety (not drinking illicit brew), and an ability to relate well with the community members were emphasised. Further, one’s marital status and management of family was highlighted as a major consideration by both the chiefs and community members, as one male chief who had held the position for ten years observed:

So these are some of the qualities, and also we look into the family where this person is coming from because he must have a family and how does he manage his family. How is it arranged?

Furthermore, age was an important consideration as pointed out by a male chief who had held the position for 20 years:

An aged person-not a youth, not a small person usually. He must look elderly because he can handle so many things. Being elderly makes him able to handle cases between a husband and a wife. Also, elderly people can manage land-related cases because they can tell where the beacon or boundary was. On the other hand, a very young person can neither tell you where the beacon was nor issues between husband and wife in the village.
Similar to the responses from the village elders, it was evident that the community was likely to select a person who had a strong religious persuasion because if one was a church adherent, it was believed that they were likely to be unbiased when making judgments during conflicts. People committed to religious teachings were perceived to be more flexible and willing to go out of their way to ensure others’ welfare even when it was inconvenient. From the FGD with community members, the qualities reported included someone who is approachable, behaves well, who understands the people in the village:

We choose according to the way we understand the person, his family background, how he/she behaves. The right person who can understand the people of his village or her village. One who is active, reasonable, has a family, and no previous criminal records.

Community members also expected village elders to be able to solve problems, or generally the ability to listen. Even then, the community members highlighted that although previously they did not consider the education of prospective village elder, they now considered this an important quality:

Initially, we were not considering education background. People tend to know that, somebody who went to school, he needs to go and seek employment somewhere else. But presently we have come to learn that, we must have a village elder, or a mijji kumi who went to school. May be who is learned. Let me say that, because there are other things may be you are invited by the chief or assistant chief and if he reaches there and if he never went to school, he cannot gather the information enough to bring to his people.

The first objective demonstrates a number of important qualities in the selection of village elders in Kenya. The place of religion in the African culture has received immense attention, with cultural aspects and practices tied around religion and spirituality (Mbiti, 2015; Ngunjiri, 2010). Consequently, having a religious worldview is not strange to expectations of leadership at the village level. Further, it has been observed that most Kenyans, perhaps up to 85%, are Christians (Kangara, 2004; Miller et al., 2011) suggesting that the Christian quality is not an exception as a required norm for positions such as those of village elders. Since Christianity teaches virtues such as conflict resolution, justice for the weak and holds the institution of the family with high regard, it is no surprise that findings in this study demonstrate that village elders were expected to espouse Christian values. Similarly, as servant leadership theory argues, the findings here demonstrate that village elders are expected to demonstrate the quality of prioritizing others in their service and leadership (Fogarty, 2016; Liden et al., 2014; Wanasika et al., 2011).

Owing to Ubuntu, an African concept of togetherness and communalism, leaders in the traditional African culture were necessarily expected to have moral values that would enable them to seek the common good for all in the society (Ngunjiri, 2016; Shrivastava et al., 2014). In this study, (much as educational values were now being considered as expressed by the community) it was evident that personal moral qualities were a strong consideration in the selection process as the position was considered important in the security and development of the community. By emphasizing these qualities, the community was seeking a person that could provide a strong moral example in line with the Ubuntu philosophy. Moreover, the position holder was expected to be mature agewise, and have own family which suggests that the community members put up someone that would command respect not only for himself but also for the village as a whole. In traditional Africa culture, according to Wanasika et al. (2011), wisdom was associated with the old, hence the insistence on older individuals taking over the villager eldership position. Thus, while the village eldership position was held voluntarily, findings from this study show that particular qualities were needed for effectiveness.

### 6.2. Important values in volunteer leadership

The second objective of the study focused on values considered essential in the village eldership role. On their part, the village elders’ respondences focused more on community characteristics which are core in the delivery of their mandate, as well as the ideals they desired to see in the community. They highlighted peace, justice, harmonious living, good relationships, treating everyone fairly (without bias), respect for people and their properties, hard work, and earning a living without being involved in criminal activities, listening, and praying. Others included personal values such as good conduct, truthfulness and honesty.

The chiefs similarly had higher expectations on the values that village elders should possess. They highlighted fairness when resolving disputes at the village level, availability, relationship with community members as important values for village elders. A male chief who had held the position for ten years, noted:

* [Should be an individual] Who is nonpartisan, when people come you should listen to both parties and when you make a judgment, it should be, you don’t side with one party. That is very important...

Being family-oriented or the ability to manage a family was also evident as a value that village elders needed to live by. In this regard, a male chief who had held the position for around a year noted:

* You cannot put a village head, someone who is not married. Someone who doesn’t understand what a family is. Someone who has experienced difficulties in his marriage, who understands what’s a family [is ideal]. You cannot put somebody in as a village head who is not married. Even if it is a woman, she must be married.

For the community members, values such as integrity, honesty, family, not being a drunkard were important for the office of the village elder.

* The values reported to be held by the village elders are in in line with Reed and Selber’s (2000) argument that there are values, perceptions, and beliefs distinctive to active volunteers, with spiritual fulfilment, religion, and the value placed on community service being values that are positively related to volunteering. Values such as fairness when resolving disputes at the village level, availability, relationship with community members, and being family-oriented echo Kim, Cha, Cichy, Kim, and Tkach’s (2016), argument that volunteer leaders have a stewardship responsibility based on trust, results, and trustworthiness. Furthermore, the mention of prayer and allusion to religious qualities in the delivery of services to community members aligns with Rochester et al. (2016) position that values are often underpinned in many cultures by religion. As argued by Shantz et al. (2014, p.689), ‘volunteers who are motivated by prosocial values are more likely to be engaged with volunteer work because it allows them to be authentic and express their preferred self.’ Village elders in this study depicted prosocial values such as the concern for others, resolving disputes, among others.

Some of the values held by the village elders were similar to those associated with servant leadership. Patterson (2003) highlighted love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment and services as important values held by servant leaders. However, while love, trust, humility, altruism and service were evident in the study, the values of vision, and empowerment were not mentioned by any of the participants. Mostly, the values mentioned by the participants were more on the moral issues, which are further supported by Wanasika et al. (2011) as aspects of servant leadership evident in traditional African leadership. These values are also characteristic of volunteer leadership, more than those who are on paid positions (Bowers, 2012; Posner, 2015).

### 6.3. How values influence village elders’ leadership

According to the village elders, the values were vital in their day to day operations as they facilitate communication and harmony amongst
the community members. Further, they reported that their values influenced how community members responded to their leadership and how the community members treated them. For example, if the elder was respectful, the community members were likely to respect them back. A 27-year-old male village elder, in line with this, observed:

You know when you have respect for elders, they also take their time to listen to what you are telling them. They respect you in return.

Furthermore, community members emulated the village elders’ good values, suggesting that these public servants acted as role models that community members sought to emulate in their day to day life.

To be a leader, people will emulate your character, the way you behave, the way you handle people, the way you listen, the way you are good to people, the way you listen to your members and so on.

(A male chief who had held the position for 20 years)

On their part, the chiefs noted that values guided the village elders, earned them respect and trust, provided them a mandate to lead, assisted them in decision making, and in communicating appropriately. A male chief who had held the position for ten years, noted:

… these values will guide how this person will be leading his people and the way he will make judgments.

Similarly, a male chief who had held the position for seven years, revealed how values earned the village elders respect:

He will have respect from the people because if he doesn’t have them, he can be despised by the people whom he is leading and most of the time they jump him (sic) and then they report directly to the assistant chief because they don't want him.

On values providing the village elders with the mandate to lead, a chief who had held the position for around a year highlighted:

Like now the value of honesty, if a village elder is honest, people trust him, they give him the mandate to work for them. So these values, if you have good values, the positive ones, you can lead these people well.

Findings from the last study objective revealed that values were important in the leadership of village elders. It was evident that the values the village elders lived by determined not only the level of respect they received from community members, but also how they were generally perceived by all. Generally, the Ubuntu philosophy that’s pervasive across African cultures calls for respect between leaders and their followers (Ngunjiri, 2016; Shrivastava et al., 2014). In addition, Muchiri (2011) noted that since African culture is collective, leadership is characterised by personal interactions and mutual respect. It is therefore not surprising that values of respect were foregrounded in this study.

Moral qualities in the village elders that could be emulated, for example being honest and a role model were considered pivotal to the way you listen to your members and so on. This study focussed on values inherent in village elders as public servants in Kenya. The findings showed that values were considered more important than education in relation to leadership. Values such as peace, respect, harmonious living, religious values, relationships, justice, honesty, and hard work influenced the village elders’ vision, mission, contribution, and day-to-day handling of issues. Moreover, there was an indication that the expectation of a volunteer leader is much higher than that of elected and paid leaders whose marital status and management of family are not necessarily important considerations.

The current study contributes to the scarce literature on village eldership in Kenya, and more so those related to volunteer leadership values. The village eldership position, the basic yet crucial element in public service merits much attention as the communal lives in the villages in Kenya revolve around it. As the study shows that values are not only held highly but also practised in village leadership in Kenya, there is a need for values to be embedded in leadership development programs for public servants as well as for those in volunteer positions.

The findings in this study are taken from Nyamira County in Kenya, and while they may reflect the situation in other counties, they should not necessarily be generalised. Typical of qualitative studies which aim at providing unique contextual and many times subjective experiences (Yilmaz, 2013), the findings here may not mirror those of other contexts. While triangulation of data and attempts at providing rich description through verbatim responses have been given as suggested for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2015; Patton, 2015), caution is needed in interpreting the study findings.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Jacqueline Nthoki Mutua: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

Timothy Mwangi Kiruhi: Conceived and designed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available on request.

Declaration of interests statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Additional information

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