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Perceptions About Expatriate Leaders in Tanzanian Non-Governmental Organizations: Elevating Local Voices

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the perceptions that Tanzanian employees have about expatriate leadership of NGOs working on children's issues in Tanzania. The researcher conducted a thorough literature review looking at African leadership theories (Acquaah, 2013; Adeleye, 2019; Bolden, 2009; Cabrera, 2013; Caldwell, 2018; Metz, 2018; Mustafa, 2015; Nkomo, 2011; Perezts, 2020; Story, 2011), defining global leadership (Cabrera, 2013; Gebelein, 2013; Heames, 2016; Lundby, 2013; Story, 2011; Terrell, 2013), and neocolonialistic NGOs in the developing world (Makuwira, 2018; Nkomo, 2011; Sakue-Collins, 2020; Sankore, 2005). Through interviews with Tanzanian staff, this study helps determine whether the presence of white, expatriate leadership of NGOs in Tanzania is an effective approach to development as perceived by local staff. Interviews were conducted with five Tanzanians who have been employed by white, expatriate leaders. Key findings include the importance of relationships, respect for local culture, assumptions about expatriates, and power dynamics at the individual, organizational, and structural level. This research may be useful to a variety of groups, including NGO leadership, and could lead to the formation of best practices for expatriate leaders. The research may also be useful for any NGO looking to empower local leadership. Lastly, the research will help a broad audience better understand the perception held about white, expatriate leadership in NGOs working on children's issues in Tanzania within the broader context of African leadership theories and NGOs' roles in perpetuating neocolonialism.

Central research question

How are expatriate leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) perceived by local, African executive, mid-management and support staff in Tanzania?

Purpose of the study

1. To better understand how expatriate leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are perceived and defined by local, African staff in Tanzania.

2. To understand how expatriate leaders of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) perpetuate or limit the neocolonialism of NGOs in their communities.

3. To make recommendations on how to improve development practice at the individual, organizational, and structural level.

Methods

Phenomenological qualitative study with local Tanzanian staff members within NGOs working on children's issues in Tanzania, East Africa.

Interviews were between 35 and 121 minutes long and were conducted over Zoom using semi-structured questions with flexibility for follow up questions.

Interviews were conducted in a mix of Swahili and English and were manually transcribed and coded by the researcher.

The use of rich, thick descriptions and member checking to help ensure validity and reliability.

"As soon as someone comes from outside, they're automatically considered to have higher understanding or knowledge of specific areas that they come ABC and that's not always accurate"

Figure 1. A participant's take on assumptions about expatriates.

"I don't think that is fair because you can't go to someone's house and try to change everything in the house and try to change that is not fair, so I don't think that is fair if they come to my country and try to change my culture."

Figure 2. A participant's views on respecting local culture.

"It's also, I mean, it's also scary as the white supervisor are highly favored compared to local leaders. In terms of the way they are living. I don't know. This makes the staffs inferior. Like you lose the confidence. Like it creates tension you know. And this can also be very challenging because it makes like the local staff to be less cooperative."

Figure 3. A participant's perspective on power and privilege.

- "There's expats who come in feeling like they own the solutions, its uniform everywhere, this is what works and that's about it."

- "So, I think this power dynamics come from earlier on and I am not sure if there's a historical pattern to that but it feels like with NGO space its so evident because it's really polarized with a lot of foreign professionals working in the space."

- "Even in the absence of like colonial structure happening right now these are the outcomes, the assumption that the west knows better, the assumption that the west can lead, and I think the only way to work with that first is having very solid values, that and an idea at least an idea of where the power dynamics that are in play in one given minute."

Figure 4. Participants' perspectives on power and coloniality.

Eight themes emerged from the data

- Defining expatriates: Expatriates were defined using geographic, racial, educational, and experiential lenses.
- Assumptions about expatriates: Participants discussed the perception that expatriates are somehow knowledgeable/experienced.
- Feelings towards expatriates: Could best be described as mixed.
- Competence as a defining factor: Expatriates must be competent and bring new skills, experiences, etc.
- Cultural humility and mitigation: Expatriates are expected to respect local culture.
- Importance of relationships: Could be considered a "best practice."
- Empowering staff and transferring skills: Could be considered a "best practice."
- Power, privilege, and coloniality: Legacy of colonialism manifests itself in structures, funding, and in inequalities.

Discussion: Connections to literature

Best Practices for Global Leadership in NGOs in Tanzania: The findings of this study build on existing literature that outlines best practices for global leadership in NGOs in developing countries (Oliphant, 2016). The findings overlap with the existing literature across themes of relationships, empowering local staff, and an understanding of and respect for local culture (Oliphant, 2016).

African leadership theories: The findings of this study connect to existing literature on African leadership theories, primarily through an insistence on relationships with others and with the community (Metz, 2018).

Neocolonialistic NGOs in the Developing World: The findings of this study connect to existing literature on neocolonialism in NGOs in the developing world and the power dynamics inherent in that neocolonialism (Nkomo, 2011; Sakue-Collins, 2020; Sankore, 2005). The findings outlined in this study depict the governance structures, funding structures, expatriate leaders, and the legacy systems of colonialism that all contribute to the facilitation of colonialism in the present.

Recommendations for practice

- Expatriate leaders must focus on relationship building as a core tenant of their work.
- Expatriate leaders need to ensure that they have a plan or system in place for empowering and transferring skills to the local staff, team members, and colleagues.
- NGOs working on children's issues in Tanzania need to institute local governance structures.
- Leaders, practitioners, academics, NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations need to provide thought leadership on how to address the structural colonialism and inequalities that persist in development work by reimagining locally driven development built on partnerships that not only empower but center local communities and the solutions that they envision.

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