

KEMI Journal of Educational Leadership and Management

KJELM

[ISSN 3079-4048]

Volume: 2 Issue: 1 | Jun-2026

Reinventing school leadership for equity and sustainability: Comparative lessons from Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania

Leila Abdullahi[1], **Caren Namalenya**[1], **Edmund Aalangdong**[1], **Sylvia Thuku**[1], **Benjamini Masebo**[1], **Jocelyne Cyiza KIREZI**[2], **Sandrine Ishimwe**[2], **Kouame Kouman Aime**[3], **Chantal Dusabe Kabanda**[2]

African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) & Education Sub-Saharan Africa (ESSA)[1], *African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) & VVOB – Education for Development*[2], *African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) & Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA)*[3]

Corresponding Author Email: leila@essa-africa.org

Cite this article in APA

https://doi.org/10.68147/c8416589

Copyright: ©2026 by the author(s). Open access under CC BY.

Abstract

School leadership is widely recognized as a critical driver of education quality, equity and system resilience across Sub-Saharan Africa. Effective school leaders influence teaching and learning, teacher motivation, curriculum implementation, community engagement and inclusive school practices, particularly in resource-constrained and fragile contexts. Despite this recognition, leadership development systems across the region remain fragmented, under-resourced and weakly institutionalised.

This paper examines school leadership ecosystems in Tanzania, Malawi and Sierra Leone. These education systems represent different stages of school leadership policy and reform while facing common challenges in leadership preparation, institutional coordination and evidence-informed practice.

The study draws on multi-country school leadership mapping studies conducted by the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) using a phased mixed-methods design comprising policy and document reviews (2000–2025), key informant interviews, focus group discussions and national validation workshops. Analysis was guided by a five-domain conceptual framework examining policy anchoring, leadership preparation and professional development, gender equity, research and evidence integration, and coordination mechanisms.

The findings reveal a consistent gap between policy intent and implementation across all three countries. Most school leaders assume office without formal preparation, induction or structured professional learning. Leadership development remains fragmented, largely donor-driven and unevenly distributed. Gender inequities continue to limit women's participation in leadership, while research evidence remains weakly integrated into leadership policy and practice. Notable innovations include Tanzania's National School Leadership Research Agenda and Sierra Leone's coaching-based leadership development model.

The paper concludes that strengthening school leadership requires moving from isolated interventions towards coherent leadership ecosystems that integrate policy, structured professional development, gender-responsive approaches, research utilization, institutional coordination and sustainable financing. Institutionalizing leadership pathways, strengthening research-policy-practice linkages and embedding leadership development within national education budgets are essential for equitable, resilient and sustainable education reform.

Key terms: School leadership; Leadership ecosystems; Educational leadership; Professional development; Education policy; Sub-Saharan Africa

1.0 Introduction

School leadership has increasingly emerged as a critical determinant of education quality, teacher effectiveness, learner achievement, and equitable system performance across Sub-Saharan Africa. In contexts where resources are limited, classrooms are overcrowded, and teacher deployment is uneven, school leaders act as catalysts for transformation shaping teaching, governance, community engagement, and inclusion. Leadership becomes especially consequential in fragile and low-resource settings where crises such as pandemics, climate shocks, and political instability amplify systemic weaknesses.

While many African countries have expanded access to education and articulated leadership requirements within policy frameworks, leadership development remains inadequately conceptualised and unevenly implemented. Policies often set expectations without establishing practical pathways for leadership preparation, supervision, mentoring, or continuous professional development (CPD). As one Sierra Leonean district officer noted, *"leadership expectations are clear on paper, but headteachers receive little guidance or support to deliver on them, especially in rural communities"* (MBSSE, 2024). This reflects a broader pattern across countries: leaders are expected to perform complex instructional and administrative roles without structured preparation, induction, or sustained support.

Persistent learning poverty, gender inequities, limited utilisation of research, and fragmented governance structures magnify the urgency of leadership reform. Reform efforts must therefore be system-oriented, transforming leadership from an individual task into an institutionalised ecosystem governed by coherent policies, coordinated stakeholder engagement, gender-responsive strategies, and strong evidence systems.

This paper aligns with the conference theme, *Catalysts for Transformation*, and the sub-theme on *Education, Leadership and Governance*, by examining how school leadership ecosystems can support equitable and sustainable education reform. Drawing on comparative school leadership mapping studies undertaken by the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL), the paper analyses evidence from Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. These countries represent diverse education contexts, governance arrangements, and reform trajectories while sharing a common commitment to strengthening school leadership. Their diversity provides an opportunity to examine both context-specific innovations and common systemic challenges that influence leadership effectiveness.

Although school leadership has received increasing scholarly and policy attention, comparative evidence examining how leadership ecosystems function across different African contexts remains limited. Existing studies frequently focus on individual leadership practices or single-country experiences, providing less attention to the policy, institutional, and governance conditions that shape leadership development and sustainability. By comparing experiences across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania, this paper addresses this gap and demonstrates how coherent leadership ecosystems, integrating policy, structured professional development, gender-responsive approaches, research utilization, and institutional coordination, can strengthen school leadership as a catalyst for equitable, resilient, and sustainable

education systems. The specific problem addressed by the study is presented in the following section.

1.1 Problem Statement

Across Sub-Saharan Africa, school leadership is increasingly recognised as a critical driver of education quality, equity, and system resilience. In response, many governments have introduced policies that assign school leaders expanded responsibilities for instructional leadership, teacher development, curriculum implementation, accountability, and community engagement. Despite these policy ambitions, leadership systems remain unevenly developed. Formal leadership preparation is often limited, professional development is fragmented and frequently donor-driven, institutional coordination is weak, and research evidence is not consistently translated into policy or practice. Persistent gender disparities further constrain inclusive leadership development.

While these challenges have been documented within individual countries, there is limited comparative evidence explaining how leadership ecosystems function across different African contexts and how policy, institutional, and governance factors interact to influence leadership effectiveness. Much of the existing literature focuses on individual leadership practices rather than the broader systems that enable or constrain sustainable leadership development.

Drawing on comparative school leadership mapping studies conducted in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania, this study addresses this gap by examining how policy frameworks, leadership preparation, gender equity, research utilization, and institutional coordination shape school leadership ecosystems. By adopting a comparative, systems-oriented perspective, the study generates evidence to inform more coherent, evidence-informed, and sustainable approaches to strengthening school leadership across Sub-Saharan Africa.

1.2 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following four core research questions:

1. How are school leadership ecosystems structured across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania?
2. What policy, institutional, and governance factors enable or constrain school leadership effectiveness across the three countries?
3. How do leadership preparation, professional development, gender equity, and research utilisation differ across the three contexts?
4. What cross-country lessons can inform the development of sustainable and inclusive school leadership ecosystems in Sub-Saharan Africa?

1.3 Contribution of the Paper

This paper contributes to the growing body of knowledge on school leadership and education reform in Sub-Saharan Africa in four key ways.

First, it provides a comparative analysis of school leadership ecosystems across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania, generating evidence from diverse policy and governance contexts. Second, it advances a systems perspective by demonstrating how policy frameworks, leadership preparation, gender equity, research utilisation, and institutional coordination collectively shape leadership effectiveness. Third, it highlights context-specific innovations and cross-country lessons that can inform leadership policy,

professional development, and institutional reform beyond individual country contexts. Finally, the paper proposes an integrated framework for strengthening school leadership ecosystems, offering practical recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and development partners seeking to promote equitable, resilient, and sustainable education systems.

1.4 Contextual Background

This study focuses on three Sub-Saharan African countries; Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania that represent diverse education systems, governance arrangements, and school leadership reform trajectories. While differing in their historical, political, and institutional contexts, all three countries have prioritised strengthening school leadership as part of broader efforts to improve education quality, equity, and system resilience. Their participation in the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) programme also provides a common platform for comparative analysis.

1.4.1 Malawi

Malawi has undertaken a series of education reforms aimed at improving school governance, leadership, and learning outcomes. The education system is guided by key policy frameworks, including the *Education Act* (2013), the *National Education Policy* (2016), the *National Teacher Policy* (2018), and the *National Education Sector Investment Plan (NESIP) 2020–2030*. These frameworks recognise school leaders as central to school improvement, instructional leadership, and effective education management.

1.4.2 Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's education system has evolved through extensive reform following years of conflict and subsequent national recovery efforts. Recent initiatives have focused on improving education quality, accountability, and school governance, particularly under the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme. School leadership has become an important component of these reforms as the country continues to strengthen institutional capacity and improve learning outcomes.

1.4.3 Tanzania

Tanzania has implemented major education reforms, including the introduction of the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) and continued decentralisation of education management. These reforms have expanded the responsibilities of school leaders in instructional leadership, curriculum implementation, and community engagement. The country's education system involves collaboration between central and local government institutions, creating a distinctive governance context for examining school leadership development.

Together, these three countries provide valuable comparative cases for understanding how different policy environments, governance structures, and reform priorities influence the development of school leadership ecosystems. Examining their shared challenges and context-specific experiences offers insights that are relevant not only to the participating countries but also to broader education reform efforts across Sub-Saharan Africa.

2.0 Literature Review

This section reviews empirical and theoretical literature on school leadership in low- and middle-income

countries (LMICs), highlighting what is known about leadership effectiveness, system reform, gender equity, and sustainability. The review establishes why leadership acts as a catalyst for transformation directly aligning with the conference theme, *"Catalysts for Transformation: Re-inventing leadership in sustainable and inclusive education ecosystems."*

2.1 School Leadership and Educational Transformation

School leadership is widely recognised as one of the most influential school-level factors affecting education quality, learner achievement, and school improvement, second only to classroom teaching (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Day et al., 2016). Effective leaders promote instructional quality, strengthen teacher motivation, foster collaboration, and create inclusive learning environments that support equitable educational outcomes.

In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), school leaders operate in contexts characterised by resource constraints, curriculum reforms, and increasing accountability demands. Consequently, leadership extends beyond school administration to include instructional leadership, community engagement, and organisational development (Bush & Oduro, 2006; UNESCO, 2021; Verspoor, 2020).

Although the importance of school leadership is well established, much of the literature focuses on individual leadership practices rather than the broader policy, institutional, and governance conditions that shape leadership effectiveness. Comparative evidence on how leadership ecosystems function across African education systems remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining school leadership ecosystems in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

2.2 Leadership Preparation and Professional Development in LMICs

Effective school leadership depends on access to structured preparation, induction, mentoring, coaching, and continuous professional development (CPD). Research shows that sustained leadership development strengthens instructional leadership, teacher effectiveness, and school improvement (Bush & Glover, 2016; Hallinger, 2003). Consequently, leadership development is increasingly viewed as a continuous professional learning process rather than a one-off training event.

However, leadership preparation remains weak across many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). School leaders are often appointed without formal leadership training, while professional development is frequently donor-funded, fragmented, and unevenly distributed (Bush & Glover, 2016; Verspoor, 2020). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, limited mentoring, inadequate coaching, and weak institutional support continue to constrain leadership effectiveness (Bush & Oduro, 2006; Oduro & MacBeath, 2003).

Although the importance of structured leadership development is well recognised, there is limited comparative evidence on how African education systems institutionalise leadership preparation and continuous professional development. This study addresses this gap by examining leadership development across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

2.3 Gender Inequities in School Leadership

Gender equity is increasingly recognised as a critical dimension of effective and inclusive school leadership. However, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions across many education systems due to persistent structural barriers, including discriminatory social norms, unequal access to professional development, limited mentorship opportunities, and gender-biased recruitment and promotion practices (Moorosi, 2010; Coleman, 2017; UN Women, 2020).

Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa suggests that these barriers are often compounded by safety concerns, mobility constraints, and competing family responsibilities, limiting women's progression into

leadership roles. Addressing these challenges requires gender-responsive leadership policies, targeted mentoring, and equitable professional development opportunities that support women's leadership advancement (Lumby & Azaola, 2014).

Despite growing attention to gender and educational leadership, limited comparative evidence exists on how different African education systems are addressing gender inequities within school leadership ecosystems. This study contributes to filling this gap through a comparative analysis of Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

2.4 Research Utilisation and Evidence-Informed Leadership

Evidence-informed leadership is increasingly recognised as essential for improving educational planning, policy implementation, and school effectiveness. Research enables education systems to identify challenges, evaluate reforms, and inform leadership practices. However, in many low- and middle-income countries, research findings are not consistently translated into policy or practice due to weak institutional linkages, limited dissemination mechanisms, and inadequate collaboration between researchers and policymakers (Nutley et al., 2007; Tikly et al., 2020).

Recent scholarship advocates for stronger partnerships between governments, universities, and practitioners, as well as national research agendas that align research with education priorities. Despite these recommendations, comparative evidence on how African education systems integrate research into school leadership development remains limited. This study addresses this gap by examining research utilisation across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

2.5 Multi-Stakeholder Coordination as a Leadership Enabler

Effective school leadership depends not only on individual leaders but also on coordinated governance systems that align the roles of ministries, local authorities, teacher education institutions, schools, and development partners. Research shows that fragmented institutional arrangements and overlapping mandates can undermine leadership development, policy implementation, and the sustainability of education reforms (Sayed & Ahmed, 2019; Wylie, 2012).

Strengthening leadership therefore requires coherent governance, clear institutional roles, and sustained collaboration among key stakeholders. Such coordination supports consistent leadership standards, professional development, and evidence-informed decision-making. However, limited comparative research has examined how different African education systems organise and coordinate these leadership ecosystems. This study addresses this gap by comparing governance and coordination mechanisms across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

3.0 Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework that conceptualises school leadership as a system-level function rather than the responsibility of individual leaders alone. Leadership effectiveness is influenced by the interaction of policy, professional learning, equity, research, and governance structures that collectively shape school leadership ecosystems. Drawing on leadership, governance, and evidence-informed policy literature, the framework provides an analytical lens for examining how these interconnected dimensions enable or constrain equitable and sustainable education reform across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

3.1 Framework Domains

The conceptual framework comprises five interrelated domains that collectively influence the

effectiveness of school leadership ecosystems.

3.1.1. Policy Anchoring and System Alignment

This domain emphasises the importance of coherent policy frameworks, leadership standards, accountability mechanisms, and adequate resources in supporting effective school leadership. Guided by policy enactment theory (Ball et al., 2012), it recognises that leadership policies are shaped by institutional capacity, organisational contexts, and implementation processes.

3.1.2. Leadership Preparation and Continuous Professional Development

Effective leadership requires structured preparation, induction, mentoring, coaching, and continuous professional development. Drawing on transformational and instructional leadership theories (Bass, 1999; Hallinger, 2003), this domain positions leadership development as a continuous learning process that strengthens instructional practice and school improvement.

3.1.3. Equity and Gender-Responsive Leadership

Inclusive leadership systems require equitable opportunities for leadership development and advancement. Informed by feminist leadership theory (Moorosi, 2010), this domain highlights the need to address structural barriers that limit women's participation while promoting inclusive leadership pathways for underrepresented groups.

3.1.4. Research and Evidence Integration

This domain recognises research as a critical resource for strengthening leadership policy and practice. Guided by evidence-informed policy frameworks (Nutley et al., 2007), it examines how research generation, knowledge translation, and evidence use contribute to leadership development and continuous system improvement.

3.1.5. Coordination and Institutional Coherence

School leadership operates within a network of ministries, local authorities, teacher education institutions, schools, and development partners. Drawing on governance theory (Briggs, 2020), this domain emphasises the importance of institutional coordination, role clarity, and collaboration in strengthening leadership ecosystems and sustaining education reform.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework for Reinventing School Leadership Ecosystems

Figure 1 illustrates the five interconnected domains that underpin effective school leadership ecosystems. The framework demonstrates that leadership effectiveness is not determined by individual leaders alone but emerges from the interaction of coherent policies, structured professional learning, gender-responsive systems, research and evidence use, and coordinated institutional arrangements. Together, these domains create the enabling conditions for equitable, resilient, and sustainable education systems.

3.2 Application of the Framework

The conceptual framework guided the design, analysis, and interpretation of this study. The five domains informed the development of the data collection tools, thematic analysis, and comparative synthesis across Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania. They also provide the structure for presenting and interpreting the findings, enabling the study to identify both context-specific innovations and cross-country lessons for strengthening school leadership ecosystems.

4.0 Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study adopted a comparative multiple-case study design, synthesising evidence from three national school leadership mapping studies conducted in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania under the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL). A phased mixed-methods approach was employed, integrating document reviews, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and national validation workshops to examine school leadership ecosystems across the three countries.

The comparative design enabled the study to identify both shared patterns and context-specific differences in leadership policy, professional development, gender equity, research utilisation, and institutional coordination, providing a comprehensive understanding of school leadership ecosystems across diverse education contexts.

4.2 Justification for Country Selection

Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania were purposively selected to provide a comparative understanding of school leadership ecosystems across diverse education contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa. The three countries represent different stages of school leadership policy development, governance arrangements, and reform trajectories while sharing a common commitment to strengthening school leadership through the African Centre for School Leadership (ACSL) programme.

The selected countries also provide important contextual variation. Malawi represents a system with established school leadership policies and standards but persistent implementation challenges. Sierra Leone offers insights from a post-conflict education system undergoing significant reforms, with increasing emphasis on coaching and school improvement. Tanzania represents a decentralised education system implementing Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reforms within a comparatively stronger research environment. Examining these contrasting contexts enabled the study to identify both context-specific innovations and cross-cutting lessons for strengthening school leadership ecosystems across Sub-Saharan Africa.

4.3 Study Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants with direct experience in school leadership policy, implementation, professional development, and research. Participants included ministry officials, district education officers, teacher educators, researchers, development partners, school leaders, and representatives from civil society organisations. Across the three countries, approximately 98 participants participated in key informant interviews and focus group discussions, providing diverse perspectives on school leadership ecosystems.

Table 1. Participants by Country and Category

Participants	Tanzania		Malawi	Siera Leone
	Mainland	Zanzibar		
Policy/ Ministry	6	7	6	7
Professional Development/ practice	8	15	5	5
Research	15	7	5	12
Grand Total	**29**	**29**	**16**	**24**

Source: Tanzania, Malawi, and Sierra Leone School Leadership Mapping Report (2025)

Note: The relatively larger number of participants from Zanzibar reflects a deliberate sampling strategy rather than proportional representation. Because logistical constraints were anticipated to limit participation during the national validation workshop, greater emphasis was placed on engaging school leaders from Zanzibar during the primary data collection phase. School leaders from Mainland Tanzania had an additional opportunity to contribute during the validation workshop, ensuring balanced representation across both contexts.

4.4 Data Collection

Data were collected using four complementary methods:

1. **Document and Literature Review:** National education policies, legislation, leadership standards, programme reports, evaluation studies, and relevant literature published between 2000 and 2025 were reviewed.
2. **Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ministry officials, district education officers, teacher educators, researchers, development partners, and professional development providers.
3. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Focus group discussions were held with school leaders, teachers, community representatives, and local government officials, where applicable.
4. **National Validation Workshops:** Multi-stakeholder workshops were conducted in each country to validate preliminary findings, strengthen interpretation, and enhance the credibility of the analysis.

4.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis guided by the study's conceptual framework. Coding and analysis focused on five domains: (1) policy anchoring and system alignment; (2) leadership preparation and continuous professional development; (3) equity and gender-responsive leadership; (4) research and evidence integration; and (5) coordination and institutional coherence. Cross-country synthesis was undertaken to identify common patterns, context-specific differences, and emerging lessons across the three countries.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval and formal authorisation were obtained from the relevant government Ministries and authorities in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania before data collection commenced. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were

maintained throughout the study. Findings were validated with national stakeholders to enhance their accuracy, contextual relevance, and credibility.

4.7 Strengths and Limitations

A key strength of this study is its comparative multiple-case design, which enabled the identification of both context-specific innovations and cross-country patterns in school leadership ecosystems. Methodological triangulation through document reviews, interviews, focus group discussions, and national validation workshops enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Furthermore, the application of a common conceptual framework across all three country studies strengthened the consistency and analytical depth of the comparative analysis.

The study also has several limitations. First, the national mapping studies differed slightly in scope and participant composition; for example, Malawi did not include interviews with school leaders, limiting direct insights into leadership practice. Second, the quality and availability of policy documents varied across countries, affecting the depth of documentary analysis. Finally, although the comparative design enhances the analytical transferability of the findings, they should not be interpreted as statistically representative of all education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa.

5.0. Results and Country Analyses

The findings are presented through the five domains of the school leadership ecosystem. Each domain begins with a cross-country synthesis before turning to country-level insights drawn from the mapping studies in Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania.

5.1. Policy and System Landscape

5.1.1. Cross-Country Synthesis

Across the three countries, policy ambition for strengthening school leadership is consistently high, reflected in national education policies, teacher policies, decentralisation frameworks, and reform documents. However, the alignment between policy commitment and policy enactment remains weak. Ministries often articulate clear leadership expectations, yet implementation suffers from chronic underfunding, limited supervisory capacity, and overlapping institutional mandates. In all contexts, district and local structures carry heavy administrative burdens, reducing their ability to provide instructional support or oversee leadership standards. The result is a persistent gap between what policy intends and what schools experience.

5.1.2 Malawi

Malawi presents one of the most comprehensive policy architectures for school leadership in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Education Act (2013), National Education Policy (2016), National Teacher Policy (2018), NESIP 2020–2030, and a set of 15 national School Leadership Standards provide unusually detailed guidance on leader roles, performance expectations, and professional conduct. However, the strength of this architecture contrasts sharply with its execution. As a senior ministry official explained,

"The leadership standards exist, but many districts do not use them because supervision is irregular and resources are inadequate" (MoE, Malawi, 2025).

District education directorates, which should oversee leadership performance, are overstretched; many

operate with insufficient staffing and transport, limiting routine supervision. Although Malawi's policy environment recognises school leaders as core drivers of quality, the system continues to struggle with underinvestment, weak monitoring, and inconsistent dissemination of standards.

5.1.3 Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's policy environment has evolved through multiple waves of crisis and reform, shaped by the civil war, Ebola epidemic, and COVID-19 disruptions. These events prompted successive governments to prioritise accountability, school governance, and recovery-focused leadership strategies. Leadership roles appear across policy documents but are interpreted unevenly across districts and local councils. One District Director noted the challenge of decentralised interpretation:

"A headteacher's responsibilities in Kailahun may differ from those in Port Loko because people interpret national policy differently". (Policy maker, Sierra Leone, 2025)

While Sierra Leone demonstrates strong reform momentum - particularly through the Free Quality School Education (FQSE) programme and accountability initiatives - the absence of national leadership standards and the persistence of resource shortages in rural areas undermine policy consistency. This creates pockets of innovation, particularly in better-resourced councils, but weak uniformity across the system.

5.1.4 Tanzania

Tanzania's policy environment is shaped by ongoing Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) reforms and a decentralised governance system that distributes education responsibilities across MoEST, PO-RALG, and local authorities. These reforms significantly expand school leaders' roles, particularly in instructional leadership and community engagement. Yet decentralisation has also created fragmented authority. A respondent described the complexity succinctly:

"School leaders get multiple circulars from MoEST, PO-RALG, and local authorities - roles are overlapping"(MoEST, 2025).

Tanzania's policy strengths lie in its strong curriculum-driven rationale for leadership, but the lack of a unified national leadership framework, inconsistent PD structures, and regional variation in support leave schools with uneven policy guidance.

Table 2. Policy Comparison Across Countries

Country	Strengths	Weaknesses
Malawi	• Clear articulation of leadership roles • Strong standards for teaching, governance, equity • Legal enforcement mechanisms (in theory)	• Weak implementation capacity • Overburdened district structures • Limited funding for supervision and CPD
Sierra Leone	• Strong reform momentum • National focus on accountability • Leadership embedded in recovery strategies	• No national leadership standards • Policy implementation inconsistent across councils • Resource shortages in rural areas

Tanzania	• Strong emphasis on instructional leadership under CBC • Decentralised structures can enhance responsiveness	• No unified national leadership framework • Fragmented authority across ministries • Variable PD quality across regions

5.2 Leadership Practices and Professional Development

5.2.1 Cross-Country Synthesis

Leadership preparation and professional development across all three countries share similar structural weaknesses. None of the countries offer pre-service leadership preparation for aspiring headteachers. Induction programmes are either absent or sporadically implemented, leaving new leaders to navigate responsibilities without structured support. Professional development (PD) is heavily donor-driven, often short-term, and poorly aligned with national priorities. Mentoring and coaching structures exist only in isolated forms, and in most cases, school leaders lack regular opportunities for instructional leadership development. These weaknesses undermine the ability of leaders to support teaching and learning.

5.2.2 Malawi

Malawi's leadership PD landscape is fragmented. While national CPD frameworks exist, they are not systematically operationalised, and many leaders assume their posts without any induction.

"As one district official noted, *"Most headteachers learn on the job. Formal induction is rare outside donor-funded projects"* (MoE, Malawi, 2025).

Rural districts are disproportionately affected, with limited access to CPD sessions due to geography and resource constraints. Although some schools implement informal mentoring, these initiatives depend heavily on individual leadership initiative rather than a coordinated national system. Malawi's PD strengths include a strong policy foundation and some emerging school-based mentorship practices, but these are overshadowed by inconsistent funding, weak coordination, and persistent dependence on external partners.

5.2.3 Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone demonstrates a notable innovation in leadership development through its School Leadership Programme (SLP), a blended model combining coaching, mentoring, and instructional supervision. Leaders participating in this programme emphasised its practical value, with one noting,

"The coaching helped me understand how to supervise teachers more constructively." Policy maker, Sierra Leone, 2025)

The SLP reflects a promising shift toward sustained, instructional-focused leadership development. However, national institutionalisation is still limited. The programme relies heavily on donor financing, and pre-service leadership pathways remain absent. Rural schools - especially in difficult-to-reach chiefdoms - receive fewer coaching visits, reinforcing geographical inequities. Despite these challenges, Sierra Leone's leadership PD environment is arguably the most dynamic of the three countries.

5.2.4 Tanzania

In Tanzania, leadership PD is strongly shaped by CBC reforms and the decentralised governance structure. Leaders report training that is heavily administrative, with limited focus on instructional

practices. One respondent stated,

"Most leadership training focuses on administrative compliance rather than how to lead teaching*."* (Policy maker, Tanzania, 2025)

Teacher training colleges play an important role in capacity development, but their offerings vary widely, and there is no national framework specifying leadership competencies or PD progression. Coaching and mentoring structures remain limited, and coordination between MoEST and PO-RALG is inconsistent. As a result, PD quality depends heavily on district-level capacity, resulting in substantial regional variation.

Table 3. Leadership Practices and Professional Development Comparison Across Countries

Country	PD Strengths	PD Weaknesses
Malawi	• Existence of CPD frameworks • Some school-based mentoring practices	• Leaders not systematically trained • CPD dependent on external funding • Inconsistent PD access across rural districts
Sierra Leone	• Coaching and mentoring integrated • Instructional focus aligned with recovery reform • Potential for scaling	• Limited national financing • PD not institutionalised in pre-service pathways • Rural schools less supported
Tanzania	• Strong demand for leadership aligned with CBC • Active teacher training colleges	• PD varies widely across regions • No national leadership development system • Limited coaching or mentoring structures

5.3 Gender and Equity in Leadership

5.3.1 Cross-Country Synthesis

Gender inequity is one of the most entrenched barriers across all three countries. Women's representation in school leadership remains disproportionately low, and gender-responsive leadership pathways are minimal. Cultural norms, safety concerns, limited mobility, and male-dominated promotion structures hinder women's access to leadership roles. All countries acknowledge gender disparities, yet few have implemented systematic measures to address them.

5.3.2 Malawi

Malawi exhibits the starkest gender disparities.

In some districts, *"only 1 out of 21 headteachers is a woman"* (MoE, Malawi, 2025).

Cultural resistance to women in leadership, especially in conservative rural areas, remains high. Safety concerns - particularly for women assigned to remote schools - constrain deployment. Domestic responsibilities and gendered expectations further prevent women from seeking or accepting leadership roles. Promotion committees often remain male dominated, limiting opportunities for women regardless of qualifications.

5.3.3 Sierra Leone

Although Sierra Leone's governance reforms emphasise inclusion, women represent fewer than 10% of school principals nationwide. A female deputy headteacher shared:

"Even when qualified, women are not considered for leadership in many rural schools." (Health teacher, Sierra Leone, 2025)

Gender norms, combined with safety concerns and limited access to PD, sustain a cycle of under-representation. While mentoring schemes exist within some donor-supported programmes, they have not been adopted system-wide.

5.3.4 Tanzania

Tanzania has slightly stronger representation of women compared to Malawi and Sierra Leone, but inequities remain persistent, particularly in rural regions. Barriers include reduced access to leadership PD, cultural expectations around family roles, and underrepresentation in leadership research and policy forums. Women continue to report challenges in rising to leadership roles despite formal qualification requirements.

Table 4. Gender Barriers Across Countries

Barrier	Malawi	Sierra Leone	Tanzania
Cultural norms	High	Very high	High
Safety concerns	High	High	Moderate
Representation in leadership	Very low	Low	Low
Gender-responsive PD	Very low	Low	Low

5.4 Research and Evidence Use

5.4.1 Malawi

Malawi's research ecosystem remains limited, with minimal leadership-focused studies and weak dissemination pathways. A ministry respondent explained that

"Leadership research rarely reaches policy decision-making" (Policy makers, Malawi, 2025).

Evidence is used inconsistently, and few formal mechanisms exist for integrating research into leadership development.

5.4.2 Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone's evidence base is growing, but dissemination remains fragmented. Research outputs often originate from donor-funded initiatives rather than national institutions, resulting in limited continuity. Universities and councils express interest in building research capacity but lack stable funding.

5.4.3 Tanzania

Tanzania stands out with over 160 identified studies on leadership and education. Despite this strong output, evidence is not consistently integrated into policy processes. Ministries and districts often operate independently of research institutions, limiting the uptake of findings.

5.4.4 Tanzania: Co-Creation of a National School Leadership Research Agenda

A distinguishing feature of the Tanzania mapping process was the co-creation of a national school leadership research agenda through structured stakeholder engagement. Unlike Malawi and Sierra Leone where research priorities are largely donor-driven or institution-specific, the Tanzania process deliberately brought together ministry officials (MoEST and PO-RALG), universities, teacher training institutions, development partners, and practitioners to jointly identify priority research questions.

This co-creation approach strengthened ownership, relevance, and legitimacy of the research agenda. Stakeholders emphasised that aligning research priorities with ongoing reforms, particularly the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) and decentralised governance, would improve the likelihood of evidence uptake in policy and practice. As one participant noted,

"When the agenda reflects our reform challenges, research becomes useful rather than academic." (Researcher, Tanzania, 2025).

The process also revealed the importance of facilitated dialogue between researchers and policymakers. While Tanzania has a relatively strong research base, the co-creation exercise helped bridge long-standing gaps between evidence producers and users, shifting the focus from isolated studies to a coordinated, system-relevant evidence agenda. This represents a practical mechanism for strengthening evidence-informed leadership development at national scale.

5.4.5 Cross-Country Lessons and Implications for Malawi and Sierra Leone

The Tanzania experience offers clear lessons for leadership and research engagements in Malawi and Sierra Leone:

· **Co-creation builds ownership:** Jointly defining research priorities with ministries, districts, and practitioners' increases commitment to using findings.

· **Relevance improves uptake:** Anchoring research agendas in live policy reforms (e.g. leadership standards in Malawi; decentralised governance in Sierra Leone) enhances policy traction.

· **Dialogue matters:** Structured spaces for researcher–policymaker interaction are as important as the research itself.

· **Scalability:** Co-creation processes can be embedded within national workshops or validation meetings without requiring significant additional resources.

For Malawi and Sierra Leone, adopting a similar co-creation approach during upcoming stakeholder engagements could strengthen national leadership research ecosystems, reduce fragmentation, and improve the translation of evidence into leadership policy and practice.

5.5 Coordination and System Coherence

5.5.1 Cross-Country Synthesis

Coordination is the weakest structural domain across all three countries. Multiple actors including

ministries, districts, teacher training colleges, and external partners operate with limited alignment. This fragmentation produces parallel systems of leadership development, uneven supervision, and duplicated efforts.

5.5.2 Malawi

Malawi's leadership landscape is characterised by numerous PD providers operating with limited ministry oversight. District structures, already burdened with administrative responsibilities, struggle to coordinate leadership activities. The result is a landscape in which promising programmes exist but lack national consolidation.

5.5.3 Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has made strides in governance reforms, yet leadership responsibilities remain fragmented across ministries, councils, and development partners. Donor-driven initiatives, while valuable, often introduce tools or training that are not sustained beyond project cycles.

5.5.4 Tanzania

In Tanzania, overlapping mandates between MoEST and PO-RALG remain the core coordination challenge. Without a unified national leadership centre or framework, school leaders receive multiple directives from different authorities, limiting coherence and creating operational confusion.

6.0 Discussion

This section interprets the findings from Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania through the conference theme *Catalysts for Transformation* and the sub-theme *Education, Leadership and Governance.* The analysis demonstrates that while leadership systems in all three countries face longstanding structural constraints, each also exhibits emerging practices and contextual innovations that - if strategically harnessed - could catalyse sustainable system transformation. Across contexts, leadership is neither a technical competency nor an individual attribute alone; it is a system-mediated function shaped by policy architecture, professional development pathways, gender dynamics, research ecosystems, financing, and multi-actor coordination.

6.1 Leadership as a Catalyst for Transformation

Across the three countries, school leadership consistently emerges as a pivotal driver of educational transformation. Leaders influence teacher practice, curriculum implementation, school climate, learner support, community engagement, and the strategic use of data. Their decisions determine whether equity commitments translate into tangible improvements in schools. Evidence from this study reaffirms that transformative leadership thrives only when the broader ecosystem is enabling. Yet school leaders across contexts describe operating in environments marked by unclear responsibilities, limited preparation, inconsistent professional development, and deeply embedded gender inequities.

In Malawi, headteachers spoke of inheriting leadership roles with *"no real guidance except what the outgoing headteacher tells you."* (Head teacher, Malawi, 2025)

In Sierra Leone, where leadership responsibilities often shift across devolved councils, one leader reflected that *"you spend more time figuring out which authority to follow than leading teachers."* (Policy maker, Sierra Leone, 2025)

In Tanzania, CBC reforms have generated new expectations, yet the institutional supports required to enact these responsibilities remain fragmented across MoEST, PO-RALG, and local authorities.

These cross-country patterns underscore that leadership cannot catalyse transformation unless the system itself is re-engineered to support leaders.

6.2 Policy–Practice Gaps and System Weaknesses

All three countries exhibit ambitious policy landscapes that articulate strong visions for leadership. Malawi's leadership standards, Sierra Leone's reform-oriented governance approach, and Tanzania's curriculum-driven frameworks each reflect high-level commitment.

Yet, as a senior official in Malawi observed, *"Policies exist, but we cannot implement them because resources and supervision structures are too weak"* (MoE Malawi, 2025).

This sentiment captures a common regional challenge: the persistent gap between policy and practice.

In Malawi, the architecture of leadership standards is not matched with corresponding investment in district-level supervision. Sierra Leone's policies suffer from uneven interpretation across councils, resulting in inconsistent enactment of leadership roles. Tanzania's decentralised model disperses authority across multiple ministries, producing contradictory directives and operational inefficiencies. These systemic weaknesses dilute the transformative potential of otherwise strong policy frameworks, limiting their ability to shift school-level practices in meaningful ways.

6.3 PD Fragmentation and the Absence of Leadership Pathways

A striking finding across the three countries is the near absence of formal leadership preparation pathways.

Aspiring headteachers in Malawi often assume their roles without structured preparation, prompting one district officer to remark, *"Leaders learn on the job; induction is rare."* (Head teacher, Malawi, 2025)

In Sierra Leone, headteachers similarly described stepping into leadership with little to no prior training, while in Tanzania, respondents emphasised that *"training is fragmented across ministries, and content varies widely." (Policy maker, Tanzania, 2025)*

Where PD exists, it is largely donor-driven and short-term, rarely integrated into national systems. Malawi's CPD frameworks are promising but under-resourced. Sierra Leone's School Leadership Programme stands out as a dynamic model of blended coaching, yet it is still externally funded and not institutionalised at national level. Tanzania's PD landscape remains shaped by administrative compliance rather than instructional leadership. The absence of coherent pathways - from pre-service leadership preparation to induction, continuous professional development, mentorship, and progression - weakens leadership capacity and constrains system transformation.

6.4 Gender Inequity as a Systemic Leadership Barrier

Gender inequity remains one of the most significant structural barriers across the three countries, undermining efforts to build inclusive leadership ecosystems.

The disparities are most pronounced in Malawi, where *"in some districts, only 1 out of 21 headteachers is a woman"* (MoE Malawi, 2025).

Sierra Leone's representation is similarly low, with women holding fewer than 10% of principal positions. As one female deputy noted, *"Even when qualified, women are not considered for leadership in many rural schools."*(Head teacher, Sierra Leone, 2025)

Tanzania shows somewhat better representation, yet substantial inequities persist, especially in rural areas and in access to PD opportunities.

These patterns reflect discriminatory norms, safety and mobility concerns, recruitment biases, and family responsibilities that disproportionately affect women. Without gender-responsive policies - such as affirmative recruitment, mentorship networks, safe deployment mechanisms, and family-friendly working conditions - leadership ecosystems will continue to exclude women's talent and undermine equity goals. Gender-blind leadership reform cannot produce inclusive education outcomes.

6.5 Weak Evidence Ecosystems and Limited Research Uptake

Although Tanzania has a relatively strong research base with over 160 documented studies on leadership and education, all three countries struggle to translate evidence into policy and practice.

In Malawi, respondents noted that *"leadership research rarely informs national planning,"* a reflection of limited dissemination channels and weak evidence-to-policy mechanisms. (Policy Maker, Malawi, 2025).

Sierra Leone similarly lacks structured knowledge translation platforms, with one official remarking that *"findings from studies often remain with development partners rather than feeding into national systems." (Researcher, Sierra Leone, 2025)*

The gap between research production and evidence use undermines system learning. Stronger leadership ecosystems require coordinated national research agendas, closer university–ministry partnerships, and dedicated funding for local research. Evidence needs to be synthesised, communicated, and integrated into decision-making processes if leaders are to benefit from emerging insights.

6.6 Fragmented Coordination Undermines Sustainability

Coordination challenges are pervasive across all three contexts. In Malawi, multiple PD providers operate with limited oversight, and district structures already burdened with administrative tasks struggle to coordinate leadership development. Sierra Leone's devolved governance creates overlapping leadership responsibilities across councils and ministries, complicating accountability. In Tanzania, the dual authority of MoEST and PO-RALG generates structural fragmentation that leaves school leaders navigating conflicting directives.

Without coherent coordination, leadership reforms remain piecemeal and unsustainable. Effective coordination requires clear role delineation, unified leadership frameworks, harmonised PD systems, and functional platforms for multi-actor collaboration. Countries that establish dedicated leadership centres or coordination bodies - capable of aligning ministries, districts, universities, and development partners - are more likely to sustain reforms and scale promising innovations.

6.7 Co-Creation of Research Agendas as a Catalyst for Evidence Uptake

An important cross-country insight emerging from the Tanzania mapping exercise - absent in Malawi and Sierra Leone - was the co-creation of a national school leadership research agenda. Through structured engagement involving MoEST, PO-RALG, universities, teacher training institutions, and development partners, Tanzania deliberately shifted from fragmented, donor-driven research towards a shared, system-relevant evidence agenda.

This process directly addressed one of the persistent weaknesses identified across all three countries: the limited translation of research into policy and practice. While Tanzania already had a comparatively strong research base, stakeholders acknowledged that evidence often remained disconnected from reform priorities. The co-creation approach helped bridge this gap by aligning research questions with live system challenges, particularly those arising from Competency-Based Curriculum reforms and decentralised governance structures. As a result, research was repositioned from an academic exercise to a strategic tool for leadership development and system improvement.

This finding reinforces the study's conceptual framework, particularly Domain 4 (Research and Evidence Integration). It demonstrates that evidence use does not improve solely through increased research production, but through governance processes that shape how research agendas are defined, owned, and applied. In contrast, Malawi and Sierra Leone continue to rely largely on externally driven research priorities, limiting ownership and reducing the likelihood that findings inform leadership policy or professional development.

The Tanzania experience suggests that co-creation is itself a form of leadership reform - strengthening coordination, building trust between researchers and policymakers, and embedding evidence within national decision-making processes. As such, it represents a practical, scalable innovation that can catalyze more sustainable and inclusive leadership ecosystems across the region.

7.0 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that school leadership is a critical catalyst for building sustainable, inclusive, and resilient education ecosystems across Sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence from Malawi, Sierra Leone, and Tanzania confirms that effective leadership influences teaching quality, curriculum implementation, equity, school governance, and community engagement. However, leadership systems across the three countries remain structurally under-supported. Despite strong policy intentions, leadership development is weakened by fragmented professional development pathways, persistent gender inequities, weak integration of research into decision-making, and poor coordination across institutions.

The comparative analysis highlights that leadership challenges are not primarily a function of individual capacity, but of system design. Policies frequently outpace implementation; professional development is short-term and donor-driven; women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles; and evidence systems are weakly connected to reform processes. These structural constraints limit leadership's ability to function as a driver of transformation.

At the same time, the study identifies promising practices that offer pathways for reform. Notably, Tanzania's co-creation of a national school leadership research agenda demonstrates how deliberate engagement between ministries, researchers, and practitioners can strengthen ownership, relevance, and use of evidence. This approach moves research beyond isolated studies towards a system-level resource that informs leadership policy and professional development. The absence of similar mechanisms in Malawi and Sierra Leone underscores the importance of intentional governance processes for evidence integration.

Overall, the findings suggest that re-inventing school leadership requires a shift from piecemeal interventions to ecosystem-level reform. Leadership must be anchored within coherent policy frameworks, supported through continuous and gender-responsive development pathways, informed by locally owned research agendas, and sustained through strong coordination mechanisms. Without these systemic conditions, leadership will remain constrained in its ability to catalyse inclusive and sustainable educational transformation.

8.0 Recommendations

Drawing on the comparative findings and lessons from Tanzania, the following recommendations are proposed for policymakers, practitioners, and partners:

1. Anchor Leadership Reform within Coherent, Financed Systems

Countries should strengthen the alignment between leadership policies and implementation by embedding leadership development within national education financing frameworks. Leadership

standards and role expectations must be supported by clear supervisory structures, dedicated budgets, and accountability mechanisms at district and school levels.

2. Establish Structured Leadership Pathways

Ministries should institutionalise leadership pathways that span pre-service preparation, induction, continuous professional development, coaching, and mentorship. Effective models, such as Sierra Leone's coaching-based School Leadership Programme, should be scaled and embedded within national systems rather than remaining project-based.

3. Institutionalise Co-Creation of Leadership Research Agendas

Building on Tanzania's experience, Malawi and Sierra Leone should adopt co-creation approaches to defining national leadership research priorities. Jointly developed agendas - engaging ministries, districts, school leaders, universities, and development partners - can enhance ownership, relevance, and uptake of research, strengthening evidence-informed leadership reform.

4. Strengthen Research–Policy–Practice Linkages

Co-created research agendas should directly inform leadership standards, professional development content, and monitoring frameworks. Formal partnerships between ministries and universities should be established to support ongoing dialogue, synthesis of findings, and translation of research into policy-relevant formats.

5. Advance Gender-Responsive Leadership Pipelines

Targeted measures are required to address persistent gender inequities in leadership. These include affirmative recruitment strategies, mentorship networks for women leaders, safe and supportive deployment policies, and leadership development opportunities tailored to women and underrepresented groups.

6. Improve Coordination and Institutional Coherence

Governments should establish or strengthen national leadership coordination platforms to align the roles of ministries, local authorities, training institutions, and development partners. Clear role delineation and harmonised professional development systems are essential for sustaining leadership reforms and avoiding fragmentation.

References

1. African Centre for School Leadership. (2025). *Leaders in Teaching Initiative Synthesis Notes*. ADEA, ESSA, FAWE, VVOB.
2. Ball, S., Maguire, M., & Braun, A. (2012). *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools.* Routledge.
3. Bass, B. (1999). Two decades of research and development in transformational leadership. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 8(1), 9–32.
4. Bush, T., & Glover, D. (2016). School leadership and management in Africa: A review of international research. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 44(6), 791–806.
5. Bush, T., & Oduro, G. (2006). New principals in Africa: Preparation, induction and practice. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 44(4), 359–375.
6. Coleman, M. (2017). Gender and leadership in education. In *Leading for equity*. Sage.

7. Day, C., Sammons, P., & Leithwood, K. (2016). *Successful school leadership.* Education Development Trust.
8. Leithwood, K., & Jantzi, D. (2005). Transformational leadership. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 4(3), 177–199.
9. Lumby, J., & Azaola, C. (2014). Women principals in South Africa: Gender, mothering and leadership. *Gender and Education*, 26(3), 237–251.
10. Ministry of Basic and Senior Secondary Education. (2024). *Country Mapping Report for Sierra Leone.* Government of Sierra Leone.
11. Ministry of Education. (2013). *Education Act*. Government of Malawi.
12. Ministry of Education. (2016). *National Education Policy*. Government of Malawi.
13. Ministry of Education. (2018). *National Teacher Policy*. Government of Malawi.
14. Ministry of Education. (2020). *National Education Sector Investment Plan*. Government of Malawi.
15. Ministry of Education Malawi. (2025). *Country Mapping Report for Malawi.* Government of Malawi.
16. Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. (2015). *Education and Training Policy.* Government of Tanzania.
17. MoEST Tanzania. (2024). *School Leadership Mapping Report for Tanzania.* Government of Tanzania.
18. Moorosi, P. (2010). South African female principals' career paths. *Gender and Education*, 22(5), 547–560.
19. Nutley, S., Walter, I., & Davies, H. (2007). *Using evidence: How research can inform public services.* Policy Press.
20. Oduro, G., & MacBeath, J. (2003). Traditions and tensions in leadership: The Ghanaian experience. *Comparative Education*, 39(4), 439–452. President's Office – Regional Administration and Local Government. (2020). *School Administration and Management Guidelines.* Government of Tanzania.
21. Tanzania Institute of Education. (2021). *Competency-Based Curriculum Framework.* TIE.
22. Tikly, L., et al. (2020). Leadership for learning in resource-constrained contexts. *Educational Review*, 72(3), 375–393.
23. UNESCO. (2021). *Reimagining our futures together.* UNESCO Publishing.
24. UN Women. (2020). *Women's leadership for sustainable development.* UN Women.
25. Verspoor, A. (2020). *Transforming teaching and learning in Africa.* Cambridge University Press.
26. Wylie, C. (2012). *Leading and governing schools.* OECD Publishing.