

Responsible leadership as a driver of resilience in urban health and sanitation projects in Uganda

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how responsible leadership practices enhance the resilience of health and sanitation projects in Uganda.

Design/methodology/approach – Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 21 project managers, and health officers drawn from governmental, nongovernmental organizations and donor-supported projects. Thematic analysis, aided by NVivo software, was used to identify patterns linking responsible leadership dimensions to project resilience.

Findings – The results reveal that ethical decision-making fosters trust and fairness, strengthening a project's ability to absorb shocks; accountability and transparency enhance adaptability through learning and coordinated action; and sustainability orientation promotes redundancy and long-term continuity. Together, these practices create a reinforcing cycle of resilience that enables projects to maintain service delivery during disruptions.

Practical implications – The study underscores the need to integrate responsible leadership principles into project governance frameworks and leadership development programs. Emphasizing ethics, transparency and sustainability can improve stakeholder trust, donor confidence and institutional continuity in Uganda's public health and sanitation sector.

Originality/value – This study provides context-specific empirical insights from Uganda on how responsible leadership influences the resilience of health and sanitation projects. It contributes new evidence from a low-resource African context, demonstrating that ethical, transparent and sustainability-oriented leadership behaviors are critical drivers of adaptability, continuity and long-term project performance.



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The study broadens the understanding of leadership and resilience beyond corporate and Western settings, offering fresh insights relevant to public sector governance and development practice in emerging economies.

Keywords Responsible leadership, Project resilience, Health and sanitation projects, Uganda

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In an era marked by global uncertainty, increasing environmental shocks and persistent health challenges, ensuring continuity of essential services has become a critical imperative for health and sanitation projects worldwide (Kyambade and Namatovu, 2026; Khoshmaram *et al.*, 2025; Kanbara and Shaw, 2024). Health systems must not only recover from disruptions but maintain operations and adapt to changing demands (Bailey *et al.*, 2025). Across Sub-Saharan Africa, the pressures are particularly acute with resource constraints, institutional fragility and socio-political volatility all threaten the resilience of health and sanitation services (Kyambade and Namatovu, 2026; Kyambade *et al.*, 2026e). In Uganda specifically, recurrent water-borne disease outbreaks, infrastructure limitations and frequent funding shortfalls underscore the need for leadership that can drive adaptation, redundancy and sustained service delivery under adverse conditions.

Within this context, responsible leadership characterized by ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency, and a sustainability orientation (James and Priyadarshini, 2021), emerges as a potentially powerful enabler of project resilience. Responsible leadership extends beyond traditional leadership constructs by emphasizing relational, normative and stakeholder-centred behaviors (de Klerk and Jooste, 2023; Hleb *et al.*, 2025). Recent reviews highlight how ethical and responsible leadership practices impact organizational culture, stakeholder trust and long-term sustainability (Maak and Pless, 2006; de Klerk and Jooste, 2023; Hleb *et al.*, 2025; Kyambade *et al.*, 2026a). Meanwhile, resilience theory originally conceptualized in ecological systems (Holling, 1973) and applied to organizational contexts, emphasizes capacities such as shock absorption, adaptability and operational redundancy as core to sustaining functions in turbulent environments (Kazilionis, 2023).

Despite increasing interest in leadership-resilience linkages, there remain important gaps. Much work on leadership in health systems addresses crisis response (e.g. pandemic leadership) while neglecting everyday continuity and recovery in resource-constrained settings (Bailey *et al.*, 2025; Kyambade and Namatovu, 2026). Moreover, the role of responsible leadership especially the behavioral and moral dimensions such as ethical decision-making and stakeholder orientation, in shaping project resilience remains underexplored in the health and sanitation sectors of the Global South. Indeed, scholars argue that leadership models developed in high-income settings may not translate seamlessly to African health systems, where relational and collective logics often dominate (Grobler and Koen, 2024). Given Uganda's context and the critical role of health and sanitation projects for public welfare, a focused inquiry into how responsible leadership fosters resilience is both timely and necessary.

This study therefore examines how responsible leadership practices influence the resilience of health and sanitation projects in Uganda. Responsible leadership is operationalized through three key dimensions including: (i) ethical decision-making; (ii) accountability and transparency; and (iii) sustainability orientation. Project resilience is measured by three capacities, that is, (a) shock absorption capacity, (b) adaptability and (c) operational redundancy. The core research question guiding this inquiry is, "How do

responsible leadership practices influence the resilience of health and sanitation projects in Uganda?”

By investigating these pathways in the Ugandan health and sanitation project context, this study contributes both theoretically by integrating responsible leadership and resilience literatures and practically, by offering insights to policymakers, project managers and development practitioners who seek to build resilient service delivery systems in challenging environments. The findings are expected to inform leadership development, governance frameworks and resilience strategies tailored to low-resource settings.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on responsible leadership and resilience. Section 3 outlines the methodological approach. Section 4 presents findings from the empirical investigation. Section 5 discusses implications, limitations and avenues for future research. Finally, Section 6 concludes with recommendations for policy and practice.

2. Literature review

2.1 *The concept of responsible leadership*

Responsible leadership has emerged as a distinctive construct in leadership scholarship, one that emphasizes moral decision-making, stakeholder orientation, transparency and accountability rather than purely strategic or transactional leadership. Recent studies show that responsible leadership is associated with long-term sustainability, ethical culture, and stakeholder trust (Maak and Pless, 2006; de Klerk and Jooste, 2023; Kyambade *et al.*, 2023). For example, Roque, Pitacho and Lima (2025) argue that responsible leadership is a catalyst for organizational resilience by promoting inclusive decision-making, ethical behavior and stakeholder engagement. In health and sanitation projects especially in low-resource settings, the behavioral and moral dimensions of leadership (e.g. fairness, accountability, transparency) become critical because uncertainties and resource constraints magnify the consequences of poor leadership choices (Barbar *et al.*, 2025). Thus, framing leadership in these moral/relational terms helps extend leadership theory beyond performance outcomes to continuity, adaptability and resilience.

2.2 *The concept of project resilience*

The concept of resilience originally stems from ecological systems (Holling, 1973) but has been increasingly applied in organizational and project contexts. Resilience is viewed not simply as recovery from shock, but as the capacity to absorb disturbance, adapt operations, and sustain core functions under stress (Southwick and Charney, 2018; Nisioti *et al.*, 2023). Researchers of organizational resilience delineate key dimensions such as shock-absorption, adaptability (learning, reorganising) and redundancy (having backup systems/resources) (Bai *et al.*, 2025; Hillmann and Guenther, 2021). In the healthcare and sanitation sector, resilience involves continuity of service delivery during financial, institutional or environmental shocks, highlighting the importance of leadership and governance practices in enabling these capacities (Foroughi *et al.*, 2022; Haldane *et al.*, 2021).

2.3 *Linking responsible leadership and resilience*

Emerging research indicates that leadership practices centered on ethics, transparency and stakeholder orientation can significantly influence organizational resilience. For example, Onson *et al.* (2025) found that ethical leadership positively correlates with organizational resilience, mediated by trust and learning processes. Meanwhile, Tvedt *et al.* (2023) reviewed leadership strategies and organizational resilience in project settings, found that leadership behaviors such as open communication, accountability and empowerment

enhance resilience capacities. In low-resource settings, especially in public-service projects, responsible leadership can facilitate stakeholder trust and collective learning, which in turn supports adaptive capacity and redundancy (Roque *et al.*, 2025). Thus, the nexus between responsible leadership and resilience is increasingly supported though under-examined in health and sanitation project contexts in Africa.

Therefore, this study advances the following propositions:

- P1. Responsible leadership influences the resilience of health and sanitation projects through ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency that enhance adaptability and continuity during disruptions.
- P2. Ethical decision-making fosters project resilience by strengthening trust, fairness and collective commitment, which improve the capacity to absorb and recover from shocks.
- P3. Accountability and transparency in leadership enhance the adaptive capacity of health and sanitation projects through open communication, learning and coordinated stakeholder action.
- P4. A sustainability-oriented leadership approach promotes operational redundancy and long-term resilience by encouraging resource efficiency and proactive risk management.

2.4 Theoretical review

Relational leadership theory (RLT) provides the foundational lens for understanding how responsible leadership behaviors shape collective outcomes in organizational and project contexts. RLT posits that leadership is not merely an individual act of influence, but a socially constructed, ethical, and relational process that emerges through interactions among leaders and followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Maak and Pless, 2006). Within this framework, leadership effectiveness is rooted in values such as trust, respect, fairness and dialogue, qualities that align closely with the dimensions of ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency, and sustainability orientation that define responsible leadership. Responsible leadership extends the relational perspective by explicitly emphasizing the moral and stakeholder-centered dimensions of leadership. It views leaders as agents of social responsibility who balance economic objectives with the broader welfare of stakeholders and society (Pless and Maak, 2011; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018). In health and sanitation projects, such leadership is essential because outcomes depend on cooperative relationships between government agencies, local communities and donor organizations. Leaders who practice transparency and moral reasoning foster trust and shared ownership, which in turn enhance collective capacity to manage uncertainty and maintain continuity. Thus, RLT supports the proposition that responsible leadership behaviors can generate social capital and collective learning, both of which are vital precursors to resilience in project environments (Maak, Pless and Voegtlin, 2016).

Resilience theory, first advanced by Holling (1973), provides the second theoretical pillar for this study. Originally developed in ecology, it conceptualizes resilience as a system's capacity to absorb shocks, adapt to change and reorganize while maintaining core functions. In organizational studies, resilience is interpreted as the ability of institutions, teams or projects to withstand disruptions and recover through flexibility, learning and redundancy (Lengnick-Hall, Beck and Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Boin and van Eeten, 2013). Applied to health and sanitation projects, resilience involves maintaining essential services during

crises, adjusting operations to resource or policy changes, and building institutional redundancy to prevent total breakdown. Resilience theory also emphasizes the role of adaptive cycles and feedback mechanisms that allow systems to learn from disturbance and reorganize for greater long-term sustainability (Folke, 2016; Kyambade *et al.*, 2026b). This perspective highlights the importance of leadership behaviors that encourage transparency, participatory decision-making, and proactive planning, all of which enable continuous learning and adjustment. Hence, when project leaders demonstrate accountability, ethical judgment, and a sustainability mindset, they contribute to building the adaptive and absorptive capacities that underpin resilient systems (Duchek, 2020).

Integrating relational leadership theory and resilience theory offers a multidimensional understanding of how leadership behaviors translate into resilient project systems. While RLT focuses on the social and ethical processes through which leaders build trust and engagement, resilience theory explains the dynamic and structural mechanisms that allow systems to absorb and adapt to disruptions. Together, they suggest that responsible leadership acts as a pathway to resilience, operationalized through transparent communication, ethical decision-making, and sustainability-oriented planning. Leaders who nurture collaborative relationships (RLT) enhance the adaptive and learning capacities emphasized in resilience theory, enabling projects to sustain operations amid shocks. This integrated lens positions responsible leadership not merely as a managerial competence but as a moral and relational capacity that transforms uncertainty into opportunity, ensuring the continuity and sustainability of health and sanitation projects in Uganda's complex operational environment.

The integration of relational leadership theory and resilience theory therefore provides a novel explanatory pathway linking leadership behavior to system-level resilience outcomes. While RLT explains how leaders cultivate trust, dialogue and shared responsibility through ethical and relational practices (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Maak and Pless, 2006), resilience theory clarifies how these relational processes translate into concrete resilience capacities such as shock absorption, adaptability and redundancy (Duchek, 2020; Folke, 2016). In this study, responsible leadership functions as the connecting mechanism: relational practices generate social capital and collective commitment, which in turn enable project systems to absorb disturbances, reorganize, and sustain service delivery. This combined theoretical lens therefore advances existing scholarship by demonstrating that resilience in health and sanitation projects is not only a structural or operational phenomenon but also a relational and ethical one shaped by leadership interactions and stakeholder engagement.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative interpretive research design to explore how responsible leadership practices influence resilience in health and sanitation projects. An interpretive qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences and perceptions of leadership and resilience within real project environments rather than to test causal relationships. This approach allows researchers to examine complex social processes and contextual dynamics through participants' lived experiences and interpretations (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Saunders *et al.*, 2009). The focus was not only on what leaders do but also on how they make sense of ethical decision-making, accountability, and sustainability in the face of project disruptions. This design aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through human interaction and meaning-making. By adopting this perspective, the study sought to generate rich contextual insights rather than generalizable statistical outcomes. Given the interpretivist and

phenomenological orientation of the study, the findings do not aim to establish causal relationships between responsible leadership and resilience. Rather, the study explores participants' experiences and perceptions to identify how leadership practices are associated with and may contribute to resilience mechanisms such as shock absorption, adaptability and redundancy within project contexts.

3.2 Study context and setting

The study was conducted within health and sanitation projects operating under Uganda's Ministry of Health across the Kampala Metropolitan Area and selected districts in Central Uganda. These regions were purposively chosen because they host diverse sanitation and health initiatives ranging from community-based hygiene projects to district-level health infrastructure programs, often funded through partnerships between government, donor agencies, and private actors. The setting represents a complex and dynamic environment characterized by frequent funding delays, environmental challenges, and governance pressures, making it ideal for examining the interplay between responsible leadership and project resilience.

3.3 Population and sampling strategy

The target population comprised professionals involved in the planning, coordination, and implementation of health and sanitation projects in Central Uganda. The study focused on project managers, health officers, team leaders, engineers, and administrative personnel working in government agencies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and donor-supported projects. Project managers and health officers mainly oversaw planning, monitoring and service delivery, while team leaders and engineers handled field coordination and technical supervision. Administrative personnel supported logistics, reporting, and stakeholder coordination. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who (i) held leadership, technical or coordination roles in health and sanitation projects and (ii) had at least two years of project implementation or management experience. This ensured that respondents had adequate knowledge of leadership practices and resilience in project contexts. A total of 21 participants were interviewed across 10 projects, including four government-led, three NGO-implemented and three donor-supported initiatives. The respondents comprised six project managers, four health officers, five team leaders, three engineers and three administrative personnel. The projects included a mix of ongoing and recently completed initiatives implemented within the last five years, enabling participants to reflect on both current practices and lessons learned. The projects were identified through consultation with district health offices, NGO networks and publicly available project records within the Kampala Metropolitan Area.

Data saturation was assessed through an iterative review of interview transcripts during the data collection and analysis process. After each set of interviews, the researchers compared emerging codes and themes to determine whether new conceptual insights were still appearing. Saturation was considered achieved when additional interviews produced repetition of previously identified themes without generating substantially new information related to responsible leadership or resilience practices. Consistent with qualitative research guidance (Guest, Namey and Chen, 2020), saturation was reached by the twentieth interview, with one additional interview conducted to confirm thematic stability.

Participants were recruited through a combination of institutional referrals and direct contact with project offices. Initial access to projects was facilitated through district health offices and professional networks within the health and sanitation sector in the Kampala Metropolitan Area. Project managers were first contacted and informed about the purpose of

the study, after which they helped identify other relevant personnel involved in project implementation, including health officers, engineers, team leaders, and administrative staff. The ten projects were purposively selected because they represented active or recently completed health and sanitation initiatives involving different institutional arrangements, including government-led, NGO-implemented, and donor-supported programs. This approach ensured representation of diverse organizational contexts relevant to the study objectives.

3.4 Data collection methods

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature on responsible leadership (Maak and Pless, 2006; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018) and project resilience (Duchek, 2020; Holling, 1973). Interview questions explored participants' experiences with ethical decision-making, accountability mechanisms, transparency in communication, sustainability orientation and responses to project shocks or disruptions. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were conducted either face-to-face, depending on participant availability and COVID-19 safety guidelines. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed *verbatim*.

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis followed the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), using both inductive and deductive coding strategies. The analysis began with immersion in the data through multiple readings of the transcripts to identify emerging patterns. Initial codes were then generated and organized around the predefined dimensions of responsible leadership of ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency, and sustainability orientation, and the three indicators of resilience: shock absorption, adaptability, and operational redundancy.

Coding was facilitated using NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software, which enabled systematic categorization and visualization of relationships between codes. Themes were refined through constant comparison across interviews to ensure internal coherence and theoretical consistency (Charmaz, 2014). To maintain rigor, peer debriefing and member checking were conducted: selected participants reviewed the emerging interpretations to confirm accuracy and credibility. The final themes were integrated into a conceptual model illustrating how responsible leadership behaviors foster resilience pathways in project operations.

The analysis combined deductive and inductive approaches. Deductively, the coding framework was initially informed by theoretical constructs derived from responsible leadership and resilience literature, which guided attention to concepts such as ethical decision-making, accountability, and sustainability orientation. Inductively, additional codes and interpretations emerged directly from participants' narratives during the analysis process. This iterative movement between theory-driven and data-driven coding enabled the researchers to both examine existing conceptual propositions and capture context-specific insights from the interview data.

In qualitative research, propositions have been found to serve as sensitizing concepts that guide data interpretation rather than hypotheses to be statistically tested (Miles *et al.*, 2014). In this study, the propositions were used as analytical lenses derived from the literature on responsible leadership and resilience to organize the thematic analysis. They helped structure the interpretation of participants' experiences while allowing new insights to emerge inductively from the interview data. While the study was informed by theoretically derived propositions, the analysis remained interpretive and inductive in nature. The propositions

were not treated as hypotheses to be tested but rather as conceptual guides used to organize themes emerging from the data.

3.6 Trustworthiness and rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, the study adhered to the [Lincoln and Guba \(1985\)](#) criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement with participants, triangulation of data sources including interviews and document reviews, and member validation to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Dependability was achieved by maintaining a detailed audit trail documenting all methodological decisions and coding procedures, ensuring the research process was systematic and transparent. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich, contextual descriptions of the study setting and participants, allowing readers to assess the extent to which the findings may apply to other contexts. Finally, confirmability was ensured through reflexive journaling and peer debriefing, which minimized researcher bias and maintained a clear link between the data and the study's interpretations. Participants were provided with an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any time, and measures to ensure confidentiality. All personal identifiers were removed during transcription, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings of the study according to the four research propositions developed earlier. Analysis revealed consistent patterns linking responsible leadership practices of ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency, and sustainability orientation, to different dimensions of project resilience examined through three operational dimensions drawn from resilience theory: shock absorption, referring to the capacity of project systems to maintain core functions during disruptions; adaptability, referring to the ability of project teams to adjust strategies and operations in response to changing conditions; and redundancy, referring to the presence of backup systems, resources or capacities that enable continuity when specific components fail. These concepts are used consistently throughout the analysis to interpret how leadership practices shape resilience outcomes.

NVivo 14 software was used to support the thematic analysis by organizing interview transcripts, generating coding frequencies, and identifying dominant leadership and resilience concepts across respondents. The coding process produced recurring keywords and thematic clusters such as *trust*, *transparency*, *ethical conduct*, *communication*, *adaptability* and *preparedness*. Word-frequency and coding queries revealed strong convergence among respondents, indicating that responsible leadership practices were consistently associated with improved resilience in health and sanitation projects. Overall, the collective responses of the 21 participants indicate that responsible leadership is widely perceived as a critical driver of project resilience, particularly through its influence on trust building, adaptive decision-making, and proactive risk management:

- Proposition 1. Responsible leadership influences the resilience of health and sanitation projects through ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency that enhance adaptability and continuity during disruptions.

Findings indicate that responsible leadership serves as a unifying force that strengthens project resilience through fairness, openness, and long-term thinking. Leaders who acted ethically and transparently created trust and psychological safety, enabling teams to remain cohesive and solution-oriented during shocks such as funding delays and operational disruptions.

As one participant shared, “Our director was open about the funding shortage and encouraged us to find ways of cutting costs without compromising service delivery. That honesty motivated us to stay committed.” (Interview P04). This shows that transparency builds motivation and shared responsibility during crises. Similarly, another respondent observed, “Transparency from the top made it easier to mobilize field teams because everyone understood the situation and felt part of the solution.” (Interview P11), illustrating how openness fosters collective problem-solving and adaptability.

A project engineer added, “We knew the decisions were fair, even when budgets were reduced, so staff trusted management and continued working hard.” (Interview P16), showing that fairness sustains morale and performance under pressure. Likewise, a program coordinator noted, “When the leader communicates truthfully, it becomes easier for us to reorganize and keep operations running.” (Interview P09), highlighting that timely communication enhances adaptive capacity.

Overall, the findings confirm that ethical decision-making, accountability, and transparency strengthen trust, cooperation, and learning, key drivers of adaptability and continuity, the core indicators of project resilience. Across the interviews, 18 out of the 21 respondents emphasized that responsible leadership directly influenced how teams responded to disruptions. Participants collectively highlighted that leaders who communicated transparently, made fair decisions, and maintained accountability enabled project teams to reorganize quickly and sustain service delivery during crises. The NVivo coding results further showed that terms related to *transparency*, *trust* and *leadership support* appeared most frequently in this theme, reinforcing the interpretation that responsible leadership plays a foundational role in strengthening resilience within health and sanitation projects:

Proposition 2. Ethical decision-making fosters project resilience by strengthening trust, fairness, and collective commitment, which improve the capacity to absorb and recover from shocks.

Ethical decision-making emerged as a key driver of project resilience. Leaders who exercised moral judgment in procurement, resource allocation, and stakeholder engagement, built trust and fairness, which helped teams withstand and recover from disruptions. In contrast, unethical or self-serving conduct weakened morale and delayed response efforts.

One participant noted, “Our project leader refused to approve a supplier linked to his relative; that honesty strengthened everyone’s trust in him.” (Interview P03). This shows how integrity under pressure builds credibility and moral authority. Another remarked, “Ethical leaders make us feel safe. We know decisions are guided by principles, not personal interest.” (Interview P14), highlighting how principled decision-making creates psychological safety and loyalty.

Similarly, a health officer shared, “During the cholera outbreak, our leader made sure resources were distributed fairly among districts. That fairness kept the teams motivated despite long hours.” (Interview P18), demonstrating that fairness sustains motivation and cooperation in crisis. A final respondent added, “Once people see integrity at the top, they become more committed, even when conditions are tough.” (Interview P01), showing that visible integrity inspires collective commitment and stability.

Overall, ethical decision-making enhances the shock absorption capacity of projects by fostering trust, fairness, and shared moral responsibility. These findings support relational leadership theory, which emphasizes integrity and trust as relational foundations of collective resilience. At the collective level, 15 respondents linked ethical leadership directly to the ability of project teams to absorb shocks and maintain operational stability. NVivo thematic clustering showed that codes related to *integrity*, *fairness* and *trust* were strongly interconnected with resilience outcomes such as *team commitment* and *continued service delivery*. These results suggest that ethical leadership not only influences individual perceptions but also strengthens collective confidence and cooperation during crises:

Proposition 3. Accountability and transparency in leadership enhance the adaptive capacity of health and sanitation projects through open communication, learning, and coordinated stakeholder action.

Findings show that accountability and transparency are vital for learning and adaptability, the main mechanisms of project resilience. Leaders who held review meetings, shared financial information, and sought stakeholder feedback created trust and open dialogue that helped teams detect risks early and respond effectively.

One participant stated, “Our manager shares both successes and failures. That openness helps us learn from mistakes and plan better.” (Interview P07), showing that transparency turns challenges into learning opportunities. Another added, “When leaders communicate clearly, we can anticipate problems instead of reacting late.” (Interview P13), emphasizing how timely communication supports proactive risk management.

A third participant noted, “Accountability sessions help us see what went wrong and what worked; they push everyone to improve.” (Interview P05), highlighting how participatory review processes foster teamwork and innovation. Similarly, a district health officer explained, “Even when reports show underperformance, our leader appreciates honesty. That attitude builds confidence and learning.” (Interview P17), illustrating that openness and tolerance for mistakes build trust and continuous improvement.

Overall, transparent and accountable leadership creates feedback loops that strengthen adaptability, learning, and responsiveness, core features of resilience. This supports resilience theory, which posits that systems evolve through continuous learning and reorganization to withstand future shocks. The analysis further revealed that 16 of the 21 participants associated accountability and transparency with improved project learning and adaptation. NVivo coding queries highlighted strong links between *open communication*, *reporting systems* and *stakeholder engagement*. Collectively, respondents indicated that when leaders shared information openly and encouraged feedback, project teams were able to anticipate risks earlier and adjust strategies more effectively:

Proposition 4. A sustainability-oriented leadership approach promotes operational redundancy and long-term resilience by encouraging resource efficiency and proactive risk management.

Findings show that leaders with a sustainability mindset focused on long-term stability, prudent resource use, and preparedness, built redundancy and ensured project continuity. Such leaders promoted staff cross-training, budget reserves, and preventive maintenance, allowing projects to remain functional during funding delays or policy shifts.

One participant shared, “Our leader trained us in multiple roles, so when someone is absent, work doesn’t stop.” (Interview P12), showing how staff versatility enhances human resource redundancy and continuity. Another noted, “We started saving a small percentage of

our budget for emergencies. That decision came from our director's long-term thinking." (Interview P02), highlighting financial foresight that cushions projects during crises.

Similarly, a respondent explained, "The emphasis on sustainability made us partner with local artisans for maintenance. It reduced dependency on external contractors." (Interview P19), illustrating how local partnerships strengthen resource self-reliance. A logistics officer added, "Because our leader thinks ahead, we always have a backup plan, like spare pumps and alternative suppliers." (Interview P08), reflecting proactive contingency planning that embeds flexibility into daily operations.

Overall, sustainability-oriented leadership promotes operational redundancy, creating alternative systems and capacities that sustain operations during shocks. This aligns with resilience theory, emphasizing foresight, adaptability and proactive planning as foundations for long-term stability and sustainable performance. Collectively, 17 respondents emphasized that sustainability-oriented leadership strengthened preparedness and operational continuity. NVivo coding results identified frequently occurring terms such as *backup systems*, *preparedness*, *long-term planning* and *resource efficiency*. These themes suggest that leaders who prioritize sustainability create redundant systems and contingency mechanisms that enable projects to continue functioning despite financial, operational or environmental disruptions.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that responsible leadership serves as a pathway to resilience by embedding ethical, transparent, and sustainable practices in project governance. Ethical decision-making builds trust (shock absorption); accountability and transparency facilitate learning and adaptability; and sustainability orientation promotes redundancy and continuity. Together, these mechanisms create a self-reinforcing cycle of resilience that enables Uganda's health and sanitation projects to survive and recover from disruptions while maintaining public service quality.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model illustrating the nexus between responsible leadership behaviors and project resilience pathways. The model shows how ethical decision-making, accountability and transparency, and sustainability orientation influence project resilience through key mechanisms of shock absorption, adaptability, and redundancy, grounded in relational leadership theory and resilience theory.

5. Discussion

5.1 *Responsible leadership as a foundation for resilience*

The study found strong empirical support for Proposition 1, confirming that responsible leadership acts as a unifying framework that strengthens adaptability and continuity in times of disruption. This aligns with recent scholarship that positions responsible leadership as an integrative model combining moral integrity, stakeholder orientation and future-oriented accountability (Maak and Pless, 2006; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; de Klerk and Jooste, 2023). In Uganda's health and sanitation projects, leaders who practiced fairness, honesty, and open communication were able to maintain trust and mobilize collective action during crises such as funding delays, disease outbreaks or procurement challenges. This observation supports Relational Leadership Theory, which emphasizes that leadership effectiveness arises from mutual trust, respect and shared meaning rather than positional authority (Uhl-Bien, 2006). By reinforcing moral legitimacy, responsible leaders foster the relational bonds and psychological safety that are essential for resilience in uncertain environments. This relationship is particularly salient in African contexts, where relationality, collective responsibility and ethical stewardship are embedded in indigenous leadership philosophies such as *ubuntu* (Asamoah and Yeboah-Assiamah, 2019; Sipondo, 2025). The convergence between relational leadership and African communal values suggests that moral

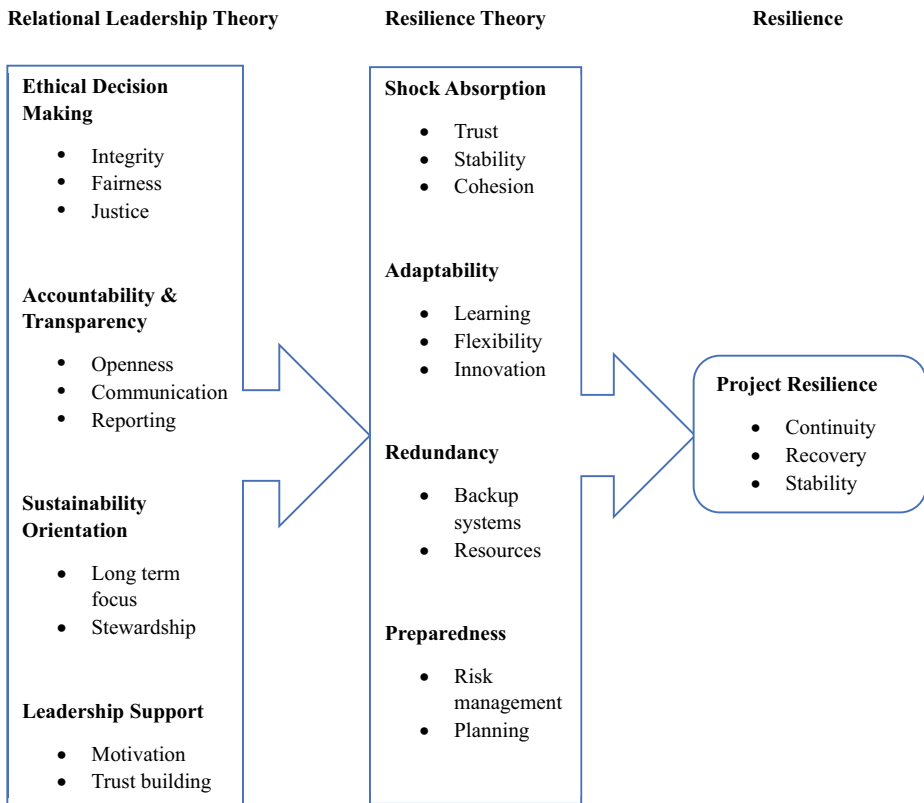


Figure 1. Conceptual model of responsible leadership, resilience pathways and theoretical integration

Source: Authors' own work

responsibility and social cohesion are not merely ethical ideals but practical enablers of resilience and project continuity.

However, it is important to recognize that responsible leadership alone does not automatically guarantee resilient outcomes. Some leadership scholars caution that the effectiveness of responsible leadership depends heavily on the responsiveness and ethical behavior of followers and implementing teams (Maak and Pless, 2006; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018; Kyambade *et al.*, 2026d). In project environments where subordinates lack commitment, competence, or ethical alignment, even well-intentioned leaders may struggle to translate responsible leadership principles into resilient project performance. In the present study, although most respondents associated responsible leadership with improved adaptability and trust, several interviewees also noted that leadership initiatives required active cooperation from technical teams and field staff to achieve meaningful results. This suggests that resilience emerges not only from leadership behavior but also from the collective responsibility of project actors involved in implementation.

It is also important to distinguish between what this study empirically demonstrates and what can be conceptually inferred. The qualitative evidence indicates that participants

consistently associated responsible leadership practices with improved project adaptability, coordination and continuity. However, these findings should be interpreted as experiential insights rather than direct causal confirmation. The broader conceptual linkage between responsible leadership and resilience mechanisms such as shock absorption, adaptability and redundancy therefore represents a theoretically informed interpretation grounded in relational leadership theory and resilience theory.

5.2 Ethical decision-making and the development of shock absorption capacity

The findings under Proposition 2 demonstrate that ethical decision-making strengthens project resilience by promoting trust, fairness, and collective commitment. Participants described how fair and transparent decision processes in resource allocation or procurement sustained staff motivation during funding shortfalls. This corroborates prior studies showing that ethical leadership nurtures trust and moral coherence, which act as buffers during organizational crises (Brown and Treviño, 2006; Eisenbeiß and Brodbeck, 2014; Grobler and Koen, 2024). From a Resilience Theory perspective, trust functions as a stabilizing mechanism that enhances the system's capacity to absorb shocks without losing core functions (Kyambade *et al.*, 2026c; Duchek, 2020). Ethical leaders reduce uncertainty by providing moral clarity and predictability, enabling collective action even under stress. Similar patterns have been documented in other fragile systems such as post-pandemic healthcare institutions, where ethical decision-making under pressure preserved staff morale and service delivery (Bailey *et al.*, 2025). Therefore, ethical leadership does more than ensure compliance; it creates the social capital necessary for project systems to absorb disturbances and maintain equilibrium, especially where formal institutional safeguards are weak.

5.3 Accountability and transparency as drivers of adaptive capacity

Evidence supporting Proposition 3 highlights the critical role of accountability and transparency in facilitating learning and adaptability. Leaders who openly shared information about budgets, risks, and performance outcomes fostered collaborative problem-solving and faster adaptation to disruptions. This aligns with prior research emphasizing that transparent communication and participatory governance enhance feedback loops and organizational learning, key elements of adaptive capacity (Lengnick-Hall *et al.*, 2011; Boin and van Eeten, 2013; Duchek, 2020). According to Relational Leadership Theory, such participative and dialogic practices strengthen leader–follower relationships and collective sensemaking (Maak *et al.*, 2016). By normalizing open dialogue and accountability, leaders promote psychological safety, allowing teams to discuss errors and innovate without fear of blame. This relational openness aligns with Resilience Theory's notion that systems evolve through cycles of learning and reorganization (Folke, 2016). In Uganda's decentralized project environments, accountability structures also play a political and institutional role by ensuring legitimacy and stakeholder confidence, particularly when projects rely on public funding. Transparent reporting and inclusive review meetings were found to bridge gaps between technical staff, community stakeholders, and donors, enhancing both operational responsiveness and institutional credibility.

Nevertheless, accountability and transparency mechanisms can also encounter practical limitations. Some studies indicate that open reporting and participatory governance do not always translate into effective action if project personnel fail to implement agreed decisions or lack the capacity to respond to identified risks (Boin and van Eeten, 2013; Duchek, 2020). In development projects, bureaucratic inertia, resource constraints or limited technical expertise among implementers may weaken the intended benefits of transparent leadership.

Therefore, while the present findings emphasize the positive role of accountable leadership, resilience also depends on the ability of project teams to operationalize these governance practices at the implementation level.

5.4 Sustainability orientation and the creation of redundancy for continuity

Findings related to Proposition 4 reveal that a sustainability-oriented leadership approach fosters operational redundancy, the deliberate creation of backup systems and resource buffers that enable continuity during crises. Leaders who emphasized preventive maintenance, cross-training of staff and diversified funding streams demonstrated forward-looking behavior consistent with long-term resilience building. These insights echo previous studies showing that sustainability-oriented leadership enhances organizational resilience by embedding proactive risk management and long-term resource stewardship (Akinwalere *et al.*, 2025; Roque *et al.*, 2025). Within Resilience Theory, redundancy is not inefficiency but a vital mechanism for ensuring that systems can reorganize and recover when specific components fail (Holling, 1973; Walker *et al.*, 2004). In Uganda's health and sanitation projects, sustainability-oriented leaders integrated resilience planning into daily operations, developing community partnerships, maintaining emergency funds and encouraging local ownership of infrastructure. This mirrors findings in broader sustainability research, which emphasize that resilient organizations prioritize long-term social and environmental value over short-term efficiency (Lengnick-Hall and Beck, 2016; DiBella *et al.*, 2023). Hence, sustainability orientation transforms leadership from reactive management to anticipatory governance, embedding resilience at both operational and strategic levels.

5.5 Integrating relational and resilience perspectives

Synthesizing these findings through the lenses of Relational Leadership Theory and Resilience Theory underscores that resilience in health and sanitation projects is not purely structural or procedural, it is profoundly relational and ethical. Responsible leadership operationalizes resilience by building trust (ethical decision-making), learning (accountability and transparency) and redundancy (sustainability orientation). Relational leadership theory provides the micro-level explanation of how leaders cultivate relationships and moral legitimacy, while resilience theory provides the macro-level explanation of how systems absorb, adapt and reorganize under stress. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that resilient outcomes emerge from moral relationships and collective action, not merely from technical or procedural safeguards. At the same time, resilience should not be attributed solely to leadership influence. Organizational resilience is inherently a distributed phenomenon involving leaders, technical staff, community stakeholders, and institutional systems (Duchek, 2020; Bhamra, Dani and Burnard, 2011). While responsible leadership can create enabling conditions such as trust, learning, and preparedness, the realization of these benefits ultimately depends on the actions of those implementing project activities. This highlights the importance of aligning leadership practices with staff capacity, ethical conduct and collaborative commitment across all levels of project governance. This integrated framework extends leadership–resilience scholarship by bridging individual ethical behavior and organizational system dynamics. It responds to calls for greater attention to the human and moral dimensions of resilience in development projects (Duchek, 2020; Bhamra, Dani and Burnard, 2011) and offers empirical grounding in a Global South context that remains underrepresented in mainstream organizational research.

5.6 *The Ugandan and African contextual contribution*

From a contextual standpoint, this study highlights the centrality of leadership ethics and relational governance in sustaining service delivery within fragile systems. In Uganda, where institutional weaknesses and donor dependency often compromise project continuity, responsible leadership compensates for structural gaps by fostering social resilience, the capacity of teams and communities to sustain cooperation amid uncertainty. These findings resonate with African scholarship emphasizing collective ethics, stewardship and moral authority as drivers of institutional effectiveness (Mangaliso, 2001; Nkomo and Kriek, 2011). The study therefore contributes a contextually grounded understanding of responsible leadership that is both globally relevant and locally resonant, enriching theories of leadership and resilience with African empirical evidence.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how responsible leadership practices enhance the resilience of health and sanitation projects in Uganda. Drawing on relational leadership theory and resilience theory, the findings show that resilience is not merely technical but also a moral and relational process grounded in leaders' behaviors and values. Ethical decision-making was found to build trust and fairness, strengthening shock absorption; accountability and transparency supported learning and adaptability; while a sustainability-oriented mindset promoted redundancy and continuity through long-term thinking and resource stewardship. Together, these practices create a reinforcing cycle that enables projects to sustain operations amid financial, social, and environmental shocks. The study advances theory by linking leadership ethics with resilience and extends responsible leadership research to the public health and sanitation sector in a developing-country context. Practically, it offers guidance for policymakers and project managers to strengthen resilience through ethical governance, participatory decision-making, and sustainability planning. Ultimately, the study concludes that leading for continuity requires more than technical expertise, it demands ethical integrity, transparency, and long-term vision. Embedding responsible leadership in Uganda's health and sanitation governance can enhance trust, service delivery, and institutional resilience beyond immediate crises.

7. Theoretical and practical implications

7.1 *Theoretical implications*

This study contributes to leadership and resilience scholarship by integrating relational leadership theory (RLT) and resilience theory (RT) into a unified framework that explains how moral and relational leadership processes generate adaptive and redundant capacities in projects. While RT (Holling, 1973; Folke, 2016) emphasizes systemic adaptability, it often overlooks the human mechanisms that make resilience possible. By linking it with RLT (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Maak and Pless, 2006), this study demonstrates that resilience is also a socially constructed and ethically enacted process. The research further extends the concept of responsible leadership (Maak, Pless and Voegtlin, 2016; Miska and Mendenhall, 2018) to the public health and sanitation sector, showing that ethical decision-making, accountability and sustainability orientation are functional drivers of project resilience, producing tangible outcomes such as trust, cooperation and continuity. In doing so, it reframes resilience as a developable capability emerging from ethical and relational interactions. Finally, by situating responsible leadership within Uganda's health and sanitation context, the study enriches leadership theory with African moral and communal perspectives, adding empirical evidence from the Global South to a field dominated by Western paradigms.

7.2 Practical implications

Practically, the findings offer valuable guidance for policy, leadership training, and project governance in Uganda and similar low-resource settings. Project governance frameworks should embed responsible leadership principles of ethical standards, transparency, and sustainability targets, to strengthen accountability and operational resilience. Leadership development programs should prioritize ethical reasoning, transparent communication, stakeholder dialogue, and sustainability planning as key competencies, complementing technical management skills. Donor agencies and implementing partners are encouraged to adopt relational governance approaches that promote collaboration, shared accountability and social capital formation. Finally, sustainability-oriented planning through staff cross-training, diversified funding and local partnerships, should be institutionalized to enhance redundancy and continuity. Aligning responsible leadership practices with Uganda's health and sanitation policy goals will ensure that public investments yield long-term, adaptive, and socially accountable outcomes.

8. Limitations and future research directions

This study offers important insights into how responsible leadership fosters resilience in Uganda's health and sanitation projects, but several limitations remain. First, as a qualitative phenomenological study involving 21 participants, the findings are context-specific and not generalizable. Future research should employ quantitative or mixed-method designs to statistically test and validate the relationship. Large-scale studies in Uganda are particularly needed to examine how ethical decision-making, accountability and sustainability orientation predict measurable aspects of project resilience such as adaptability, redundancy and performance. Second, because this study focused solely on Ugandan projects, comparative research across sectors and African contexts could reveal how institutional and cultural factors shape the leadership-resilience link. Finally, future studies should explore mediating and moderating variables such as organizational culture, stakeholder engagement or digital innovation, within quantitative models to build a predictive framework for resilient leadership in Uganda's development landscape.

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