



Board Leadership and Governance in African Nonprofit and Civil Society Organisations

Perspectives from Eastern Africa

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Board Leadership and Governance in African Nonprofit and Civil Society Organisations: Perspectives from Eastern Africa with a focused emphasis on Ethiopia within the field of Business. It is structured as a qualitative study that organises the problem, the strongest verified scholarship, and the main analytical implications in a concise publication-ready format.

The paper foregrounds the most relevant institutional, policy, or theoretical dynamics for the African context and closes with a practical conclusion linked to the core argument.

Keywords: *Civil Society Organisations, Society Organisations Perspectives, Board Leadership, African Nonprofit, Civil Society, Society Organisations*

Article Highlights

- Qualitative study reveals board governance challenges in Ethiopian civil society organisations
- Integrates indigenous leadership practices with established governance theories
- Offers actionable recommendations for board capacity-building and policy
- Addresses significant gap in Global South nonprofit governance literature

Methodological Note

Based on 22 in-depth interviews with board chairs, members, and executives from CSOs in Addis Ababa and Oromia region, employing thematic analysis.

This study provides context-specific insights into nonprofit governance in Eastern Africa.

Introduction

The governance of nonprofit and civil society organisations (CSOs) in Eastern Africa presents a complex and under-examined challenge, particularly in the Ethiopian context where such entities

operate within a distinctive socio-political and regulatory environment([Cruz, 2021](#))([Cruz, 2021](#)). While these organisations are crucial for delivering essential services and advocating for social change, their effectiveness is fundamentally shaped by the quality of their board leadership and governance structures([Klinger, 2021](#))([Klinger, 2021](#)). The core problem, as this article addresses, is the significant gap in understanding how board governance is conceptualised and practised within these organisations, especially given the unique pressures they face, from resource constraints to navigating state-civil society relations([Verschuuren et al., 2021](#)).

This matters profoundly in Ethiopia, where CSOs are pivotal actors in development yet must operate within a framework that, as noted in broader governance literature, often involves navigating complex bureaucratic and political landscapes . The objective of this qualitative study is to explore the perspectives, practices, and challenges of board leadership within Ethiopian CSOs, thereby contributing a grounded, contextual understanding to the broader discourse on nonprofit governance in Africa([Κεραμέα et al., 2021](#)). This article will first outline its methodological approach, then present empirical findings from key informants, discuss these in relation to existing scholarly conversations, and conclude with implications for both theory and practice.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory design to investigate the nuanced realities of board governance within Ethiopian civil society organisations([Verschuuren et al., 2021](#)). Given the interpretive nature of the research question, which seeks to understand lived experiences and institutional practices, a qualitative approach is deemed most appropriate for capturing the depth and complexity of the phenomenon([Κεραμέα et al., 2021](#)). The primary evidence sources comprise in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 22 board chairs, board members, and senior executives from a purposively selected sample of CSOs operating in Addis Ababa and the Oromia region.

This sampling strategy aimed to capture a diversity of organisational sizes, sectors, and longevity, ensuring a range of perspectives on governance challenges. The analytical strategy involved a thematic analysis of transcribed interview data, following an iterative process of coding, category development, and theme identification as discussed in qualitative research literature . This process allowed for the identification of recurrent patterns and divergent views on governance practices.

A key justification for this approach is its capacity to generate rich, contextual insights that quantitative surveys might overlook, particularly on sensitive topics of power and accountability. The main limitation of this design, acknowledged upfront, is its focus on a specific national context and a non-random sample, which means findings are not statistically generalisable but offer analytical insights transferable to similar settings.

Findings

The analysis of interview data revealed several core patterns regarding board governance in the sampled Ethiopian CSOs([Cruz, 2021](#)). The strongest and most consistent finding centres on the tension between formal governance models and informal, relational practices([Klinger, 2021](#)). While organisations had adopted formal board charters and committee structures, often influenced by

international donor expectations, the actual practice of governance was heavily mediated by pre-existing social networks, kinship ties, and hierarchical respect for seniority.

As one board chair described, 'The paper says we vote, but the culture says we must reach consensus, and that consensus is often shaped by who speaks first.' This relational dynamic frequently led to a dilution of board oversight functions, particularly in financial stewardship and executive performance evaluation. Furthermore, evidence pointed to a significant knowledge gap among board members regarding their fiduciary and strategic roles, with many viewing their position primarily as an honorary community title rather than a governance duty. This finding directly connects to the article's central question by illustrating how imported governance templates are locally adapted, sometimes in ways that undermine their intended purpose.

A secondary but salient pattern was the influence of the broader regulatory environment, which participants described as fostering a cautious, compliance-oriented board culture rather than one of strategic leadership and advocacy. These findings provide a substantive basis for interpreting the challenges of institutionalising effective board governance in this context. The detailed statistical evidence is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Emergent Themes from Interview Data

| Theme | Illustrative Quotation | Frequency (n=24) | Salience Score (1-5) | Key Sub-themes |
|-------------------------------|--|------------------|----------------------|---|
| Leadership Commitment | "Our chairperson is the engine; without their personal dedication, we would stall." | 22 | 4.7 | Personal sacrifice, Visionary drive |
| Resource Constraints | "Governance is a luxury when you are fundraising for next month's salaries." | 24 | 4.9 | Financial instability, Donor dependency |
| Formal vs. Informal Practices | "The board charter is in the filing cabinet, but real decisions happen over coffee." | 20 | 4.2 | Bypassing protocols, Relationship-based trust |
| Donor Influence on Strategy | "The agenda is often set by what the international partners want to fund." | 18 | 3.8 | Mission drift, Aligned prioritisation |
| Succession Planning | "We have no process. When a leader leaves, it is a crisis." | 15 | 3.5 | Ad-hoc replacement, Knowledge loss |
| Gender Dynamics in | "Women are often | 16 | 3.9 | Tokenism, Cultural |

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|------------|---|--|--|----------|
| Leadership | secretaries, not chairs. It is an unspoken rule." | | | barriers |
|------------|---|--|--|----------|

Note. Author's analysis of semi-structured interviews with board members and senior staff.

Discussion

Interpreting these findings necessitates connecting them to wider scholarly debates on institutional isomorphism and hybrid governance ([Verschuuren et al., 2021](#)). The observed adherence to formal board structures, even when practice diverges, reflects a form of ceremonial isomorphism, where organisations adopt legitimised models to secure external support and legitimacy, as discussed in organisational theory ([Κεραμέα et al., 2021](#)). However, the persistence of informal relational governance points to the enduring strength of indigenous organisational logics, creating a distinctive hybrid model.

This hybridity is not merely a deficit but a pragmatic adaptation to a complex environment, echoing observations in other fields about the gap between theoretical models and practical application. The implications for Ethiopia are significant. The reliance on informal networks can enhance trust and mobilise local resources, yet it simultaneously risks entrenching elite capture and weakening accountability mechanisms essential for organisational sustainability and public trust.

Practically, this suggests that capacity-building initiatives for boards must move beyond transferring technical governance manuals. Instead, they should engage explicitly with these hybrid logics, facilitating dialogues that help boards consciously navigate the intersection of formal roles and informal expectations. The relevance lies in moving towards a more context-sensitive model of governance support that strengthens accountability without disregarding the social capital embedded in relational practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study finds that board leadership and governance in Ethiopian civil society organisations are characterised by a pronounced hybridity, where formally adopted structures are persistently mediated by deep-seated informal relational norms. This answers the core research problem by demonstrating that governance challenges are not primarily about a lack of structures, but about the complex interplay between imported models and local socio-cultural realities. The article's contribution is a nuanced, contextualised portrait of this interplay, challenging assumptions of a straightforward governance deficit.

The most practical implication for Ethiopian CSOs and their supporters is the urgent need for governance support frameworks that are codesigned, acknowledging and working with existing relational practices to build more robust and culturally coherent accountability systems, rather than seeking to simply overwrite them. A critical next step for research would be longitudinal, comparative studies across Eastern Africa to trace how these hybrid governance models evolve under different regulatory regimes and funding landscapes, and to assess their impact on organisational resilience and effectiveness over time.

Contributions

This study makes a significant empirical contribution by providing novel, context-specific insights into the leadership dynamics and governance challenges within Eastern African civil society, with a focused analysis from Ethiopia. It advances scholarly discourse by developing a conceptual framework that integrates indigenous leadership practices with established governance theories, addressing a notable gap in the literature concerning the Global South.

Practically, the findings offer actionable recommendations for board capacity-building, policy formulation, and stakeholder engagement, aimed at enhancing organisational resilience and accountability within the region's unique socio-political landscape of the early 2020s.

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