Management Theory, Research and Practice for Sustainable Development in Africa: A Commentary from a Practitioner's Perspective

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In this article we give a synthesis of the argument that inadequate management theory and practice have contributed to Africa’s lack of sustainable development. The article is based on a keynote address by the Governor of the Bank of Botswana, Ms Linah Mohohlo to the biannual conference of the Africa Academy of Management in Gaborone, January 2014. The governor, based on rich insights of a practitioner was content that scholars, practitioners, and policymakers have not done enough to integrate theory and practice to initiate models relevant for African sustainable development. We therefore call upon African scholars, managers, and experts to take the challenge of identifying common cultural practices which could be integrated into modern management models for African sustainable development.

**Keywords:** Africa; African sustainable development; Botswana; central bank; governor; management; management theory; management practice; Africa Academy of Management

Management is central to Africa’s sustainable development. However, it has had inadequate attention by both the scholars and practitioners. Management both in theory and practice has not featured prominently at high-level meetings of policymakers in the academia, political and economic arenas. Most of the models for Africa’s development have not stated in clear terms how management practices influence resource allocation and utilization. A former president of Ghana used a non-scholarly definition that “management is the proper and astute administration of valuable resources for the express purpose of fulfilling personal, group, community, societal needs and aspirations in a sustainable way” (Lituchy, Punnett, & Puplampu, 2013, p.xvii). He emphasized a viewpoint that management is not only the presence of entrepreneurs or business executives but also all those who have responsibility over assets and resources. Governments have to combine democratic institutions and processes to yield a stable macro environment for investments to thrive. Scholars therefore need to take up the challenge and identify points of entry to place management at the centre of development models for Africa. The thrust of the address by the Governor, Bank of Botswana to the biannual conference of the Africa Academy of Management (AFAM) was to motivate a search for the kind of management theory, research and practice that can sustain Africa’s
development. The AFAM as a community of scholars must have management
development as the starting point.

According to the World Bank report, in 2012, five out of the 10 fastest growing
economies were in Africa despite the lingering effect of the 2007–2008 financial crisis.
According to the report it was observed that Africa’s overall social economic indicators
have improved in the last decade due to policy reforms, institutional strengthening, and
spread of inclusive political institutions. Further, Africa’s robust economic growth has
also been fuelled by buoyant commodity prices on the back of high demand by emerging
economies, especially China. These favourable circumstances may not be sustained given
a number of challenges. There is, therefore, a need to investigate how best management
research can build on or modify existing theory to enhance practice for Africa’s
development. Lituchy et al. (2013) opine that there is an empirical basis so far to argue
that leadership and management in Africa are still evolving but open to Western
knowledge, although rooted in an African imagination.

This investigation would underpin the critical importance of academia in opening up
debate on such a critical issue among policymakers. It is imperative that governments
allocate resources towards management research; but this will remain farfetched to them
until scholars show the fundamental principles of the field. The promotion of effective
management practices can ensure that the continent’s resources are harnessed product-
vively to sustain socio-economic growth. This eventually should result in people’s
improved well-being.

Against the backdrop of recent economic achievements across Africa, especially in
the areas of direct investment by foreign firms, entry of multinationals and indigenous
small and medium enterprises, urgency to integrate good management traditions is greater
than ever before. Good governance structures should foster accountability and rational
resource appropriation. In appreciating the challenges and managerial gaps, the governor
recognized the need for the academic fraternity to critically appraise existing management
theories and practices. She reiterated the need for periodic platforms such as conferences
that bring together players from across the diversity of Africa to share insights. This is
with a view to discovering those factors which could strengthen and sustain the
continent’s economic growth and social development. The practices that are not relevant
and sustainable would have to be discarded and, where necessary, new management
principles developed through adaptation.

The mis-link between African research output and implementation is the inability of
end users to imbibe and utilize the research findings. In some cases, these findings are
never disseminated to the appropriate end users. The findings remain simply as academic
papers on the shelves. This scenario has made it difficult for actors in the industry to
benefit from research findings. In view of this trend, the governor posited that a
mechanism has to be developed for academicians to interact with and disseminate
research findings to policymakers and practitioners. Further, African scholars must bear
in mind that the continent is part of the dynamic global economic setting. There is no
reserve time for developing relevant contextual models. Thinking and action must
intertwine in the attempt to catch up with the rest of the world. Kiggundu (2013)
emphasized that management knowledge is associated with powerful tools and practices
that can transform social and economic systems. This is the governor’s point of interest;
how are these adopted and applied? Such tools will help Africa to create value in
economic ventures, which is currently weak or lacking altogether.
It is interesting to hear the submissions by experts on a number of management theories outlined in different research papers. Some of the theories and practices studied do not appeal to African conditions. While super-emerging economies were engaged in the long-term focus of strategic management and the shaping of new economic blocs in the 1990s, mainland African businesses were locked in state controls and riddled with corruption, poor governance policies, and a general lack of long-term focus. As observed by Bagire and Namada (2011), the models which accounted for growth of businesses in other parts of the world like firm internationalization, market liberalization, and strategic planning became common in Africa much later. They argue that African growth was stunted for lack of strategic management models, whether borrowed from more developed nations, adapted, or locally evolved. Kiggundu (2011) argues that even the field of management has become disintegrated into “many managements”; for Africa this is bad as it is occurring in a field that is central to development but yet to be harnessed for full exploitation of the continent’s wealth.

As highlighted in the 2013 Global Competitiveness Report of the World Economic Forum, out of the 38 countries in Stage 1 of development, 24 (or 63%) were in Africa. These economies depend on improving the effectiveness of state and private institutions; they also depend on availability of adequate infrastructure and, in the process, ensuring a stable macroeconomic environment and a healthy but literate workforce for productivity to improve. How does management practice factor into this structure? Only six African countries out of a total of 33 were in Stage 2, which is a group with a higher level of productivity due to the use of advanced production processes afforded by a more highly trained workforce, and adequate size of markets for goods and services. Of the 17 economies transitioning from Stage 1 to Stage 2, Africa had only five countries. However, some African countries made strides into this development path and crafted long-term visions like Vision 2030 of Kenya, Vision 2020 of Rwanda, Vision 2025 of Tanzania, recently Vision 2040 of Uganda, Vision 2020 of Nigeria, and Vision 2022 of Egypt, just to mention a few. Most of these African visions are anchored by economic, political, and social pillars and aimed at transforming the economies into developed nations. It is noted however that the achievements of these “visions” have in some cases been riddled with poor management. In this respect the governor disappointingly noted that only one country in Africa was among the 21 transiting from Stage 2 to Stage 3. It remains therefore questionable whether the African visions are really the panacea to sustainable economic development.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development dominated the 35 countries driven by innovation at Stage 3, a level at which productivity is reflected in new and innovative products facilitated by the use of high technology. Disappointingly, there was no African country at Stage 3; only one African country (Seychelles) was among the 21 transitioning from Stage 2 to Stage 3. This is why the thirst for management knowledge cannot be delayed. It is among the key current challenges for management scholars in Africa. Most African countries face scarcity of skilled manpower, and this undermines public service delivery, macroeconomic management, project implementation, and efficient running of state enterprises. Management scholars in Africa seem to agree that failure to link policy formulation and implementation creates a glaring gap which explains why very well-crafted policies fail to yield results at state level while at corporate level a disconnection exists between strategy formulation and strategy implementation (Namada, 2013; Aosa, 1992). High levels of illiteracy and morbidity also affect labour productivity as well as dependence on one or a few products.
Conversely, fragile state institutions have weakened governance and scholarship development. Tertiary education does not attract adequate funding to sufficiently address the skills needs of the business and public sectors. The relations between government and the business sector are generally not consultative. There is therefore great need to foster and cultivate public–private partnerships in all the African states.

Academic management conferences that bring together scholars from across the region and outside are therefore highly relevant. They enable universities to focus on the possible tools for addressing some of these economic development challenges. This includes critically appraising existing management theories and practices that have been developed in different socio-economic cultural settings, and evaluate their suitability in the context of African conditions. Such conferences need to have a high level of academic rigour and all the papers presented with recommendations for policy and practice need to be disseminated and subsequently applied. They are also a platform for exposure for faculty members, enabling them to break through the inner circles existing in their institutions in their home countries. Kiggundu’s (2013) exposition of his journey may provide rich insights. From a humble early education in Uganda to high-level trailblazer Emerald Award winner, he says, “I was just lucky being in the right place at the right time with the right people” (p.179). The challenge is that many faculty members in Africa are not exposed. Africa’s rich diversity requires broad knowledge through interaction with colleagues from across the continent. The governor challenged AFAM to organize academic and research platforms to provide such interaction.

On the subject of cultural heritage, there are lessons from Japan; their management practice of quality management is compatible with the country’s culture. It is a participative management model. It stresses team work, rejects the carrot and stick or authoritarian approach, and affirms work as an integral part of personal self-fulfilment. This corporate decision-making model may explain peaceful Japanese labour relations, commitment to corporate goals, and a strong work ethic. Their cultural heritage also underpins the consultative relationship that exists between the business sector and government. Similarly, Chinese management practices reflect that country’s non-adversarial and inclusive cultural values. Africa has long waited to witness culturally tailored management approaches consistent with its diversity.

A nascent model in Botswana’s traditional governance framework referred to as the *Kgotla* System can demonstrate the possibilities. It is a jealously guarded African practice which can inform management theory and practice. The *Kgotla* System of governance is essentially a village assembly which limits the powers of the village elders and provides opportunities for all members of the community to participate in decision-making (Peter Hawthorne, July 2000 edition of *Time World*). It is rooted in Botswana’s traditional social philosophy which holds that aggression is better expressed through dialogue than a spear. In resolving an issue at a meeting everybody has their say. The *Kgotla* System is the art of leadership through dialogue. It stresses the common good and welfare of the community, not the individual. Such a long-existing practice, and many others that have not been given scholarly scrutiny, could anchor the development of management theories in the African cultural heritage.

In Kenya, especially in the western Luhya community’s cultural orientation, the *Liguru* system of administration is still applied to date. Under the system, members of a village consisting of a definite population area of about 2000 persons, in a quorate general meeting of the community members known as the *Baraza*, elect one of the respected members to be the head of that community, known as the *Liguru* or *Owe likuru*.
The terminology literally means the holder of the central pillar in the house. In the same meeting the community members either elect or designate a number of respected elder persons to act as advisers to the Liguru and as designate judges in the resolution of disputes. Members of the community refer their disputes in all spheres of their life ranging from marriage, succession, property rights, boundary disputes, and criminal complaints like theft before the Liguru. The Liguru has designate days in which the entire community is ordinarily called to a confluence known as the village Baraza. The Baraza is an open forum for all community members where both developmental and social aspects of the community are discussed. In the same forum, the referred cases are tabled with the aggrieved party and the adversaries being called upon to present their cases. Due to the open nature of the forum, every member in attendance is allowed to air their views on the case in reference to the facts presented and to their personal knowledge of the person with the dispute. Eventually the designate elders acting as judges pass their verdict, which is binding and enforceable by the Liguru. The emphasis in the verdict process is to maintain harmony in the community and ensure that reconciliation prevails over adversity.

According to Inyang (2008), the Western scholarship and literature devalued and deprecated the management prowess of early African civilizations, as evidenced by the great Egyptian pyramids. These foreign management systems generally failed to achieve their expected goals as they discountenanced African cultural inertia and social milieu. Inyang argues that the development of indigenous African management philosophy, rooted in African culture, its value system, and beliefs, will provide the practical way for the efficient and effective running of organizations in Africa. For example, the Ubuntu management system which emphasizes humanness, communalism, and African patriotism, provides the veritable starting point for the development of indigenous African management philosophy. Zoogah and Nkomo (2013) are concerned that the poor research in Africa undermines the ability of the continent to market its worthiness. The forces that broke down the development of business and management models that were beginning to evolve through inter-tribal trade included colonialism and Christianity. Unfortunately not much research has linked management to this historical account. The tenets of Ubuntu are generosity, charisma, humanism, hospitality, self-enrichment, and motivational leadership; with others being tolerance, consideration, integration, persuasiveness, representation, and role assumption. Similarly, management is about unison of action and through common goals the aggregation of resources to make them productive in a defined system (Lituchy et al., 2013).

In contrast, as noted by the governor, European and North American management paradigms stress the carrot-and-stick view of human motivation. In some cases the chief executive officers of companies do not interact with the other workers who in essence use their leadership to yield results. The management style adopted by many African companies is therefore Western-oriented. The matter is not made better by the education models that African managers have progressed through. In African training institutions, the curriculum is modelled on the system of the former colonial powers. Indigenous models are not taught at all. The education system gradually alienates the students from the African leadership configuration. In African communities, management and leadership knowledge were passed to the younger generation through oral stories, apprenticeship, and a form of internship. There were no formal classes, as introduced in the Western model, with examinable course units. This has promoted cram work and less learning. In the African education system a lot of emphasis was on personal character growth; in the
Western models what matters is academic intellect. They emphasize training for certification. The African informal training objective was that a learner should be useful both to himself as well as the community (Igusi, 1995). Onwuejeogwu (1995) argued that induction in a modern setting could be replaced by traditional rituals where oaths related to honesty and integrity could be taken. Western training which focuses only on corporate goals creates tension between workers and management to the detriment of corporate loyalty. Baryamureeba (2014) is content that many workers are running away from managers not from organizations. This observation underpins the fact that there are poor managers in many organizations. The education institutions should redirect their efforts to management development through hands-on models in collaboration with industry, civil society, and public institutions.

As a related matter, and given the fact that the international environment has an impact on Africa’s business performance, it is important to address the problem of situations in which African enterprises and public organizations continue to face uncertain international trade models. Even multinational firms operating in Africa are bent to the management style of their domicile cultures and home country contexts. Some of them have rejected and ignored host country practices out right and disregarded local cultural value systems. The models of knowledge creation and transfer have therefore not benefitted Africa.

Local capacity has not improved even when some multinationals have worked in Africa for decades, sending in experts who work alongside local professionals. An example can be drawn from the export processing zones (EPZ). Various African countries adopted EPZs where strategic locations with facilities designated for certain international companies to set up industry meant to produce exclusively for export commodities on preferential terms for tax waivers on imports and exports, reduced administrative bottlenecks, among other incentives. The purpose of the incentives, among others, was to attract knowledge diffusion into the host countries from expatriate managers. This manpower capacity would drive the industry beyond the tax holiday period. This has not worked out as expected; the anticipation for knowledge and skill transfer has been a fallacy. While this model was considered by the World Bank as a catalyst to economic development in Africa, it was opposed by some analysts. Barker (1986) argues that the benefits obtained are minimal compared to the costs incurred. He posits that the EPZ concept only benefits developed economies because the multinational corporations which are the key players repatriate most of their profits leading to economic stagnation and low human development. This has marginalized the developing economies, especially those in Africa. Even where there have been successes in knowledge transfer to the African workers, the processes of acquisition, internalization, and institutionalization have not placed African cultural heritage in perspective.

Research in this area is still lacking. No appropriate answers have been provided to the key questions of how the local workforce can acquire management knowledge that is in tandem with African values yet with a world outlook to drive industry in modern times. There is therefore a need for further research and study in this area to assist African governments to maximize the benefits obtained from this economic pattern. In this respect, the governor challenged the AFAM to champion the cause. Researchers should investigate the configuration of African management principles within the global trading architecture. Mohohlo pointed out that African governments have open policies to attract investors but once their enterprises are operational there is no framework to check how
they are managing the firms. This is where scholarly research should inform policymakers.

Evidently, businesses and governments in Africa do not invest in management research. When junior faculty, doctoral students, and other academics in the management field seek fellowships or internships in enterprises and public agencies, they are turned down (personal experiences of staff at Makerere University Business School). Basically, the rich linkage between universities and organizations is not exploited. Jowi and Obamba (2013) observe that Africa is still lagging far behind other world regions in terms of gross domestic expenditure on research and development (R&D) as well as the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) devoted to R&D activities. In terms of expenditure, Africa as a whole spends an average of 0.4% of its GDP on research and development, whereas industrialized countries spend approximately six times that amount. This is likely to remain the same in the foreseeable future unless particularly dramatic measures are taken (NEPAD, 2010).

Due to the demand to carry out research for completion of higher degrees or career progression, many African academics resort to desk research. They use secondary data contained in shallow reports about policy and operations. Management cannot be internalized from such resources, but through empirical tests and exposition in the mazes of organizational routine. In the few situations where empirical data are obtained, information given is inadequate, citing none disclosure policies of respective companies (Namada, 2013; Machuki, 2011). The emerging challenge is that African scholars are unable to publish such findings internationally as they are wanting in academic rigour.

Good management practices are expected to translate into improved service delivery, efficiency, and effectiveness in whichever organizational context. De Beer and Mason (2009) show that graduate and doctoral work can benefit from blended pedagogies in Africa to accelerate the number of required graduates, manage faculty workload better, and produce the number of qualified candidates necessary to address higher education needs in management/business fields. Awayiga, Onumah, and Tsameny (2010) support the proposition that there is a need to address pedagogical methods to enhance acquired competencies among graduates so as to address the new workplace needs in Africa.

Management practices interconnect in ways that enable the functioning of organizations. Management is a wide field with specific disciplines of organizational endeavour. Management practices vary across firms and industries. However, management practices cut across organizational functionality in whichever discipline one is interested in. There is inadequate research that has focused specifically on management practices. Ghosal (2005) has posited that several scholars have lately voiced their concerns about the current state of management research and pedagogy. Previously, Donaldson (2002) and Pfeffer and Fong (2002) stated that there is a lack of impact of management research on management practice. In essence, management education has not translated into effective business performance. Ghosal (2005, p.76) is more explicit, saying that “theory has had negative effect on practice of management; management theories are more causal or functional”.

In essence, the effect of management research not being implemented emanates principally from the fact that most business owners and government managers are not trained in management. They therefore assume management from a personalized approach not from a knowledge or research-based approach. To reverse this trend there is a need for management researchers to find a way in to industry and government. This could be through advertised workshops and short training sessions which seek to
disseminate periodic research output to industry owners and government managers. Academic researchers can also actively enter into industrial partnerships with a view of studying specific organizational contexts and sharing the findings with the management of that particular organization. Certainly, practitioners would be gratified if their routine work was modelled and conceptual knowledge imparted to them to improve identified areas of weakness.

The other important area for which African management models would obtain and be used is in the small and medium-sized enterprises sector (SME). SMEs face unique local challenges like delays in business licensing, rigid labour laws, taxation, ineffective contract enforcement mechanisms, and access to credit. Of the 189 countries surveyed in the World Bank’s 2013 Ease of Doing Business Survey, eight out of the 10 poorest performers were African countries. Only eight were in the top 100 performers. It is imperative, therefore, that actors should explore ways and means of removing impediments to successful African businesses generally. After all, SMEs are major employers of women and youth, and they contribute to poverty reduction. This means that they have enormous potential to sustain Africa’s economic development. This is the central call for management theory, research, and practice in Africa. In small enterprises everyone is a manager but they have to learn to do management better (Bagire & Hojops, 2014). Scholars must appreciate the richness of this sector for African economic transformation. Universities should place SMEs higher on the research agenda than the current emphasis on large industrial organizations, banks, or companies listed on the stock exchange, from which data collection is easier. These organizations also have formal systems and data can easily reveal clear patterns in view of Western literature that are then used as reference points. In SMEs, on the other hand, researchers encounter uncompromising owners or managers who do not appreciate or are not aware of the benefits of participating in management research. Kiggundu’s (2013) posting, however, queries the strong belief in SMEs as the panacea for African economic breakthrough. He is content that Africa is “missing a critical mass of entrepreneurially-driven and professionally managed high growth and scalable business enterprises” (p.188). This missing inter-sector could help break through the barriers to create economic and social values. Management knowledge will therefore help provide an understanding of the nature of industrial business, design effective implementation tools, and assess the potential for growth. Educating the masses and helping businesses to nurture a global mindset are necessary. These roles are a premise of academia, scholarly associations like AFAM, and business schools. The governor is concerned that a lot more still has to be done.

The benefits from management research for entrepreneurs in the SME and informal sectors are the skills to strategically plan as opposed to a kneejerk management style; further, research will enable them to integrate knowledge to add value to their products and processes. They should also be able to anticipate changes in business environments, taking advantage of the opportunities while minimizing the threats. The expertise to analyse their human capital requirements is also very pertinent even at the small-scale level of their enterprises.

In conclusion, it is believable that concrete steps in developing management today can yield tremendous results in the medium term. The challenge for the AFAM in its fifth year of endeavour is to craft strategies to address this scholarship dilemma. Posterity will reward AFAM for critically evaluating the various management theories and practices and their relevance to African conditions, in order to impart African perspectives in public policy formulation and business practices that will sustain prosperity for the continent. As
with other disciplines, and especially in the context of an academic environment, there may be a tendency to ignore the importance of practical application of theory; and theory and research, without practical application, have little value. Management theorists are particularly susceptible in this respect. Without persuasion, management scholarship will diminish if research work is not readily done, with findings made accessible and understandable. We recommend shared efforts by various parties, namely scholars, political leadership, industrialists, business managers, and civil society organizations. African management should be embedded in both business and socio-political systems. The concerns of Ms Linah Mohohlo as a high-ranking practitioner of the Central Bank are a call not only to the AFAM community but also to all faculty in African universities, policymakers in the political realm, and business managers across the continent.

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