# African Leadership Global

## Connecting Leaders to Indigenous Knowledge

# Business Report

By Gamu Matarira and Nicola Strong

October 2024

"...the continent must 'take our destiny in our own hands' and transform the dynamics with Europe."

**Nana Akufo-Addo, former President of Ghana (2019)**

"Critically, we need a critical self-assessment of ourselves as Africans."

**Africa Define Yourself (2002) Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki, former President South Africa**

"The best way to help Africa today is to help them stand on their own feet. And the best way to do that is by helping to create jobs."

**Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Nigeria (TED Talk 2007)**

"The time for the rest of the world to listen more to leadership voices from indigenous communities is long overdue. When we don't listen to each other, we all lose out eventually."

**Dr Dumisani Magadlela (In conversation 2024)**

# Executive Summary

This report aims to shed light on the critical factors that individuals of African heritage consider essential in the practice of effective leadership by offering a fresh, nuanced perspective. It seeks to deepen the understanding of leadership within an African context, where cultural, historical and social influences play a significant role in shaping leadership styles and practices.

Leadership centres on the ability to influence, inspire and guide others. Comprehending leadership from an African perspective requires an exploration of the indigenous wisdom, traditions and values that are deeply embedded in the continent's diverse societies. Afterall, "African" today is a complex and multifaceted term that encompasses a wide range of identities, experiences and perspectives.

African Leadership Global launched the Stories of African Leadership (SoAL) research project in November 2023, in response to recent calls for a revitalisation of what African leadership means for the African who is keen to re-engage with his/her African value system. For some, shifting to a more Afro-centric approach to leadership involves the rejection of many aspects of Western culture to allow one to reconnect with their African indigenous knowledge. However, for many, there is a recognition that being African is inextricably linked to Western influences, as historical events such as colonisation, the transatlantic slave trade and globalisation have profoundly shaped African societies, cultures and identities. This has created a dynamic interplay between traditional African values and Western ideas, practices and systems.

The intention of the SoAL project is to allow the shape of wise leadership to emerge from across the African continent. One of the key findings from the pilot is that 20% of respondents believe traditional wisdom plays a crucial role in shaping African leadership behaviours when combined with practical experience. The majority of leaders prioritise practical experience, with a similar number valuing an equal blend of traditional wisdom, academic learning and practical experience. This highlights the high regard for practical, real-world experience in leadership, alongside the recognition that integrating traditional knowledge enhances leadership effectiveness.

Furthermore, leaders who prioritise their personal importance are generally viewed negatively, whereas those who emphasise the importance of family, community, or their team are perceived more favourably. This indicates a clear preference for collectivist leadership approaches over individualistic ones. Additionally, nearly one-third of the African leaders interviewed believe that the leaders they have experienced strive to act in the best interests of everyone, or simply, to do what is right.

The SoAL project demonstrates the power of storytelling as a tool to challenge and refine leadership paradigms. By examining leadership through both positive and negative lenses and everything in-between, it identifies what is considered 'good' leadership from the perspectives of the very communities that this research seeks to serve.

# Contents

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The SoAL project was not accomplished in isolation; we would like to thank the following organisations, groups and individuals who supported and contributed to our intention and goals:

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Acknowledgement has been given throughout the report of the many businesses and projects that are addressing challenges faced by the African Continent. There will be projects that are doing great work that we have not mentioned, in which case we would like to hear from you. This report is the beginning and, as we progress to our next phase, we hope that our information continues to be inclusive, relevant and comprehensive.

# Who is this report for?

This report is directed to those people who are developing their businesses, leading teams and operating in the many and diverse countries within the African continent. Including those starting out as an entrepreneur, in a small enterprise, part of a national business or pan African corporation.
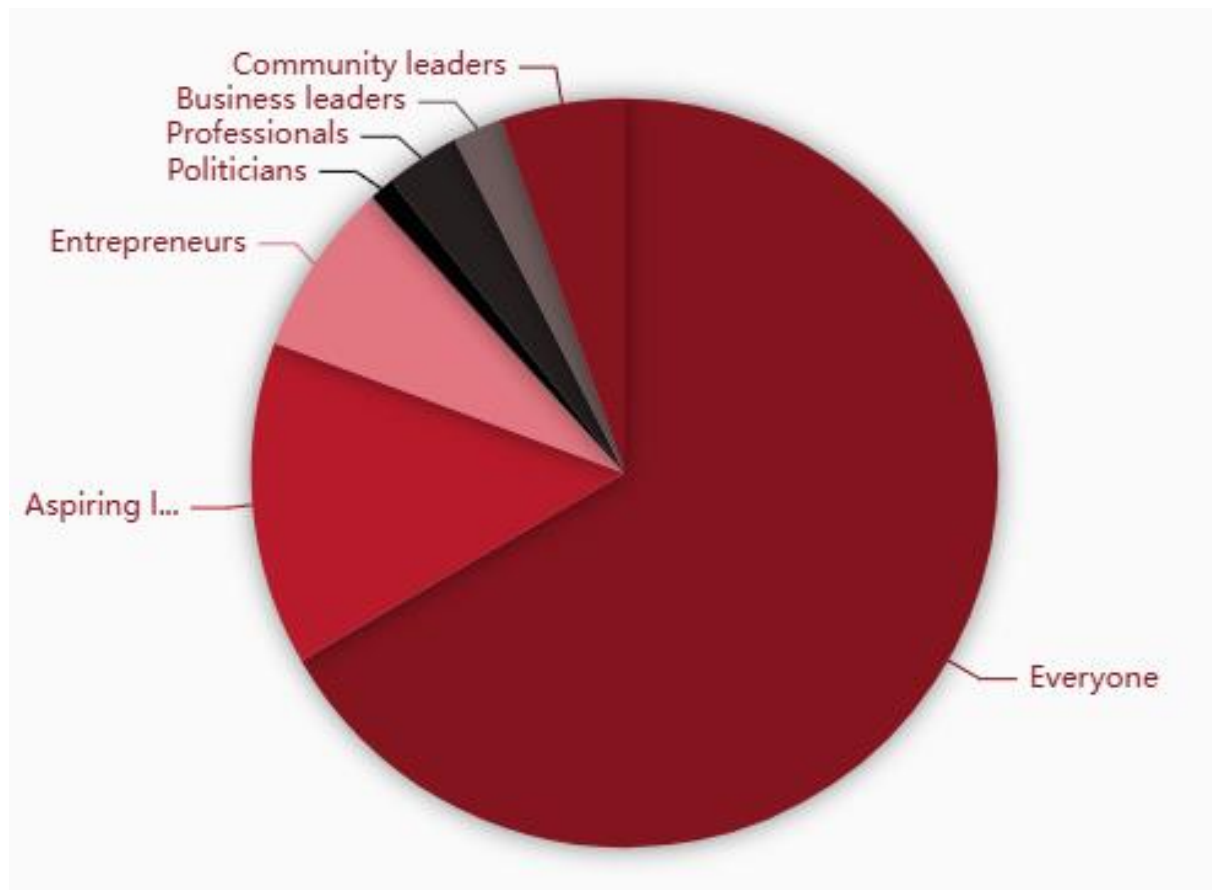


When our ninety-five storytellers were asked who they felt should hear their story, the overwhelming answer was Everyone

> *"When we say leadership, I cannot be a leader if I don't have a team or if I don't have a community."*
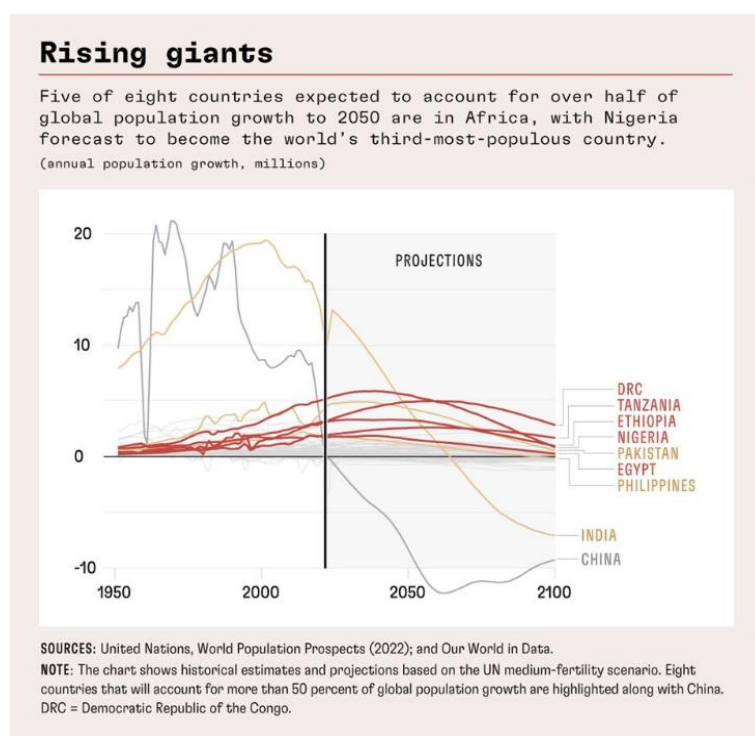>
> Business Leader, Ethiopia

# Background and Context

At the time of writing this report, the African Continent has a population of over 1.4 billion people. The projected population for 2050 is 2.4 billion[1]. It also suggests that 25% of the World population will be living in Africa by 2050[2].

In terms of integrating Africa into global value chains, the physical geography presents a logistical challenge whilst increasingly, the impact that foreign companies have on the Continent is being reported[3]. However, current trends indicate that Africa could play a significant role both in the future of energy sources[4] and the supply of rich, natural resources. A challenge to African businesses to step forward.

Through history, the West, Northern Hemisphere and the East have all had a significant impact on the way business has been conducted in Africa. In conversation with African leaders, this is not always fit for purpose. Forward thinking conversations in many African countries are identifying opportunities in the face of the many threats of this paradoxical future.



**Rising giants**

Five of eight countries expected to account for over half of global population growth to 2050 are in Africa, with Nigeria forecast to become the world's third-most-populous country.

(annual population growth, millions)

SOURCES: United Nations, World Population Prospects (2022); and Our World in Data.
NOTE: The chart shows historical estimates and projections based on the UN medium-fertility scenario. Eight countries that will account for more than 50 percent of global population growth are highlighted along with China. DRC = Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The World Economic Forum asked the question, how will Africa create jobs to meet the population boom?[5] It is widely recognised that the young people today are their county's greatest asset. While writing this report, many projects were identified for improving employment opportunities and, at the same time, addressing the enormous gaps that prevent an effective economy from functioning. For example, South Africa is one of many countries launching new initiatives to create ten thousand jobs[6].

Furthermore, the Agricultural sector has, and continues to be, the backbone for stability and economic growth for many. Yet, Africa is reported to have imported $55 Billion of food[7] this year. There is an urgent need to build stronger farming communities, who know how to restore the land, with a network of businesses that can take this potential to market. It should

[1] Why science is key in Africa's agricultural transformation | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)
[2] African Century (imf.org)
[3] How the world profits from Africa's wealth - Institute of the Black World 21st Century (ibw21.org)
[4] Bold Moves | Sustainable Energy for All (seforall.org)
[5] Empower youth in Africa to create jobs, growth and peace | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)
[6] 10000 jobs initiative South Africa
[7] Why science is key in Africa's agricultural transformation | World Economic Forum (weforum.org)

not be underestimated the level of investment and skills that will be needed to shift its role in the world's food supply while navigating the threats of climate change[8].

Advances in technology and AI are growing exponentially across the Continent[9]. Networks of technology hubs and ecosystems are appearing in places such as Kenya, Ghana, South Africa and Nigeria to name just a few[10].

Almost 85% of jobs in Sub-Saharan Africa are informal, providing work for a large portion of the continent's young job seekers[11]. This high percentage reflects the dominance of the informal economy across the continent, where small-scale enterprises and individual entrepreneurs often operate without formal registration, regulation or taxation. The large contribution from the informal sector underscores the importance of the informal economy in driving economic activity, particularly in areas where formal sector opportunities are limited. Therefore, when discussing a leadership model that works for the African context, it is important to include those that are often excluded from the conversation. This report explores how leadership is developed within a business environment where trust and social capital are critical.

> *Entrepreneurship gave me a lot of relief...because I was able to see the direct impact within the community.*
>
> Entrepreneur, South Africa

Our aims are fourfold:

- To develop support tools (created by Africans) that enable the entrepreneurial potential of businesses across the African continent.

- To increase the diversity of AI data sets/AI trusts by creating uniquely African data indicators that can be used to train AI algorithms[12].

- To contribute to an indigenous knowledge policy at a local and regional level

- To progress six UN Sustainable Development Goals



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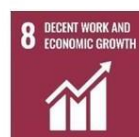
[8] World Food Programme, South-South and Triangular Cooperation.
[9] Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy for Africa 2024 | African Union (au.int)
[10] https://www.afrilabs.com/
[11] Princeton University (2023), Formalizing Africa's Informal Sector Through the AfCFTA: An Opportunity for Economic Transformation, Journal of Public and International Affairs, Sept. 11, 2023.
[12] Ngulube, P. (2023). From Orality to Digital Assets: Managing Indigenous Knowledge in Africa in the Wake of the Open Science Movement. *The Serials Librarian*, 84(5–8), 71–85

# The Shape of Leadership

When we consider the different regions on the African Continent, their stories of leadership have much earlier beginnings. In North Africa, Ancient Egypt's great achievements in architecture, art, trade, medicine and politics still catch our imagination. Then there was the Kingdom of Kush (Sudan), Aksum (Eritrea and Ethiopia), Mansa Musa's Mali Empire who made Timbuktu a centre of learning. The people of the Songhai Empire demonstrated a sophisticated trading system, including agricultural expertise and gold trading across the globe[131415]. These vast and highly successful civilisations were all in existence before the impact of colonialism.



*Figure 1: Alapo, V., (2022) The Spatial Organization of Pre-Colonial African Kingdoms University of Nebraska Lincoln*

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[13] Akinboye, G., (2006) Beautiful Nubia: The Rise of an Ancient African Kingdom University of Ibadan, Nigeria

[14] Alapo, V., (2022) The Spatial Organization of Pre-Colonial African Kingdoms: The Empires of Ethiopia & Mali. Department of Geography, University of Nebraska

[15] Phillips, J., (2016) Kingdom of Aksum Published in book The Encyclopaedia of Empire, DOI: 10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe159

To keep within the boundaries of the research, this report summarises the results drawn primarily from Ghana, South Africa and the UK Diaspora.

The ancient Empire of Ghana (West Africa) dominated the development of the economy of the region from the 8th to 13th centuries CE. As leaders in the trans-Saharan gold trade, it was known for its wealth and power (Griaule, 1990). Both salt, a valued commodity, and gold were produced and traded widely. It was the skill of people of the Ghanaian Empire in controlling the trading which facilitated the development of its economy[16].

The Empire had a monarchical system of government, with Ghana, or the "Wagadou," as the head of state. Ghana was supported by a council of ministers and advisers and possessed absolute power. The social structure of the empire was hierarchical, with the ruling class being made up of nobility, free males, craftsmen, and slaves. Today, the traditional leader follows this lineage but takes a separate and complimentary role from that of leaders in the democratic political system. Specifically, they are seen as a guide and decision-maker for the community, a land manager and local gatekeeper between the formal authorities and their community. This role has been cited as being particularly successful in new areas of land that are being developed and populated (Tieleman, Uitermark 2019[17]). Furthermore, these roles have been affirmed in the 1992 Constitution, Article 270 (Mawuko-Yevugah, Attipoe 2021[18]). In terms of the SoAL research, the work of local leaders was highlighted by several storytellers from Ghana, who emphasised the value of community-based leaders.

20th Century South Africa has presented some of the most famous leaders known and loved all over the World. Remembered as "the Father of the [South African] Nation", Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela was viewed as a "Moral Authority" with a great "concern for truth". In his own words he said, "I was not a messiah, but an ordinary man who had become a leader because of extraordinary circumstances"[19]. The beginning of his story, while controversial, enabled people to hear a new language of social justice. In his later years, Mandela's paradoxical humility with great presence achieved enormous progress in fostering racial reconciliation. Nelson Mandela, with other great leaders in the world, offered a blueprint for thinking differently about how to lead. Another prominent leader was Archbishop Desmond Tutu, whose resilience and strength of kindness navigated a path through the traumas of Apartheid[20]. As mentioned previously, the intention of this research is to contribute further to the definition and honouring of the Indigenous knowledge across South Africa[21].

Looking to the 21st Century, the shape of leadership in Africa is hybrid in nature. Leaders have to appreciate a multidimensional, cross-cultural context in relation to the temporal dimensions throughout its history. It would be reasonable to propose that contemporary African organisations still contain these variations in culture, demonstrated in their ideas, practices as well as the growing successes of their people.

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[16] Mohamed, H.A., (2023) African Civilization: From Ancient Kingdoms to Modern Societies Pub: International Journal of Social Science And Human Research, 6(6), June 2023, pp.3294-3303

[17] Chiefs in the City: Traditional Authority in the Modern State

[18] Mawuko-Yevugah, Lord, & Attipoe, H. A. (2021). Chieftaincy and traditional authority in modern democratic Ghana. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, *40*(3), pp.319–335.

[19] Mandela, Nelson (1995). Long walk to freedom: the autobiography of Nelson Mandela. Pub: Little Brown & Co.

[20] Tutu, Archbishop D., (1999) No future without forgiveness. Pub: Doubleday New York

[21] Indigenous Knowledge Systems Policy Department of Science and Technology, South Africa

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The study of African Leadership is beginning to build momentum, though it is still predominantly using the work of Western and Eastern theories and models. However, while conducting a literature search, it was refreshing to find some exciting theories (Metz African Ethics, 2018[22]), models (Integral Africa, 2020[23]) and principles (De Klerk Principles 2024[24]) being developed within the African domain that are connected to the region's indigenous knowledge.

# Indigenous Knowledge

There is no universally agreed upon definition of Indigenous Knowledge, however for the purposes of this report we have used Boven and Morohashi's (2002)[25] definition:

> *"A complete body of knowledge, knowhow and practices maintained and developed by peoples [...] who have extended histories of interaction with the natural environment".*

Historically, the term "indigenous" and the concept of indigenous knowledge was linked to Western notions of primitive, untamed or natural. This, sadly, led to condescension and limited recognition in the West and East. For the millions of indigenous peoples across Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania, indigenous knowledge, or what is sometimes referred to as native ways of knowing, remains a practical framework that benefits individuals within a specific geography. For these communities, indigenous knowledge embodies the dynamic relationship between people and their environment. It represents how they have come to understand their surroundings, organising their knowledge of local plants, animals, cultural traditions and history in ways that improve their everyday lives[26].

Now, there is a global movement to recognise, collect, value and celebrate indigenous wisdom, to offer sustainable solutions to critical problems faced across the world[27][28].

IPACC Interactive Map of – The Indigenous Peoples of Africa

[22] Metz, T., (2018), An African theory of good leadership, African Journal of Business Ethics, Vol. 12(2), November 2018, pp. 36-53

[23] Pampallis, P., et all (2020) Urban Hub 23: Integral Africa - thriveable cities Pub. IntergralMENTORS

[24] de Klerk, J. J., & Jooste, M. (2023). Responsible leadership and its place in the leadership domain: A meaning-based systematic review. Business and Society Review, 128(4), 606–634.

[25] Boven, K. and Morohashi, J. (2002), Best Practices Using Indigenous Knowledge, UNESCO/MOST, The Hague, The Netherlands; Nuffic and Paris.

[26] Semali, L.M. and Kincheloe, J.L., (2002). Introduction: What is indigenous knowledge and why should we study it?. In What is indigenous knowledge? (pp. 3-57). Routledge.

[27] Indigenous People's Traditional Knowledge Must Be Preserved, Valued Globally, Speakers Stress as Permanent Forum Opens Annual Session | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases (un.org)

[28] Addressing Global Challenges with Indigenous Knowledge | United Nations

For example:
- Cultural Preservation:
- Sustainable Development:
- Health and Well-being
- Resilience and Adaptation

Within fifty-four countries over 3000 languages have been recorded as an expression of the indigenous communities. It is said that one hundred of them are used as the spoken lingua Franca including Arabic, Swahili, Amharic, Oromo, Igbo, Somali, Hausa, Manding, Fuani and Yoroba[29]. In contrast, the top four most used languages for business are Arabic, French, Portuguese or English[30]. There is an additional consideration of the digital representations of the different languages. For this project, the local teams were able to ensure that the storytellers could have the flexibility to think in their mother tongue and then translate for the analysis in English. We believe that this approach is less common when conducting research on the African Continent.

African wisdom is a rich tapestry woven from centuries of traditions, beliefs, and philosophies that have been passed down through generations across the continent's diverse cultures and societies. While it is impossible to encapsulate the entire breadth of African wisdom, several core themes and principles can be highlighted including:

- Connectedness
- Community
- Compassion
- Mutual respect
- Collective responsibility for the greater good of society
- Harmony with nature
- Storytelling
- Oral tradition
- The importance of patience and persistence
- Reverence of the Elders as custodians of knowledge and tradition and
- The veneration of ancestors, who are believed to continue providing protection and wisdom through spirituality and holistic healing.

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[29] Languages of Africa - Wikipedia
[30] Marshall, T. (2016). *Prisoners of geography*. Elliott & Thompson.

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# The SoAL Project

We ran the SoAL pilot project for six months from March to August 2024 with three research teams who collected ninety-five narrative-based interviews with Managers, Senior Executives and Entrepreneurs. This report focuses particularly on the significance of leadership in South Africa, Ghana and the African Diaspora, with additional insights from other countries.

**Countries represented in Pilot of the 'Stories of African Leadership' Project:**
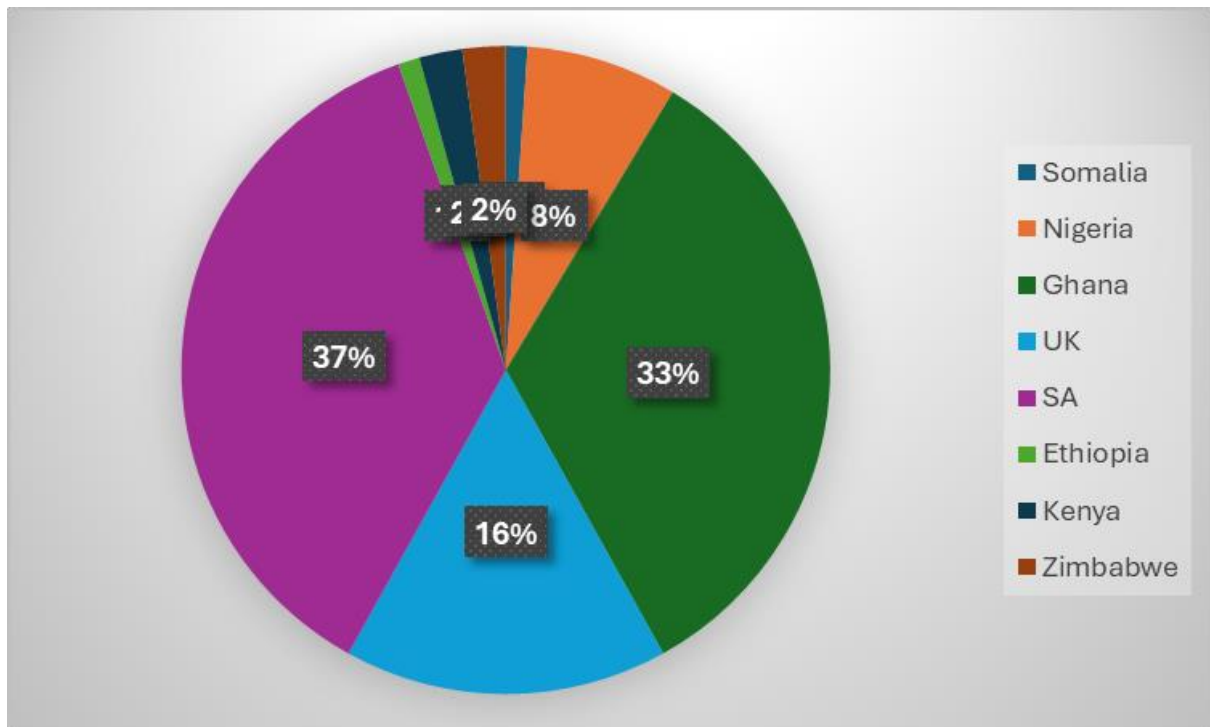


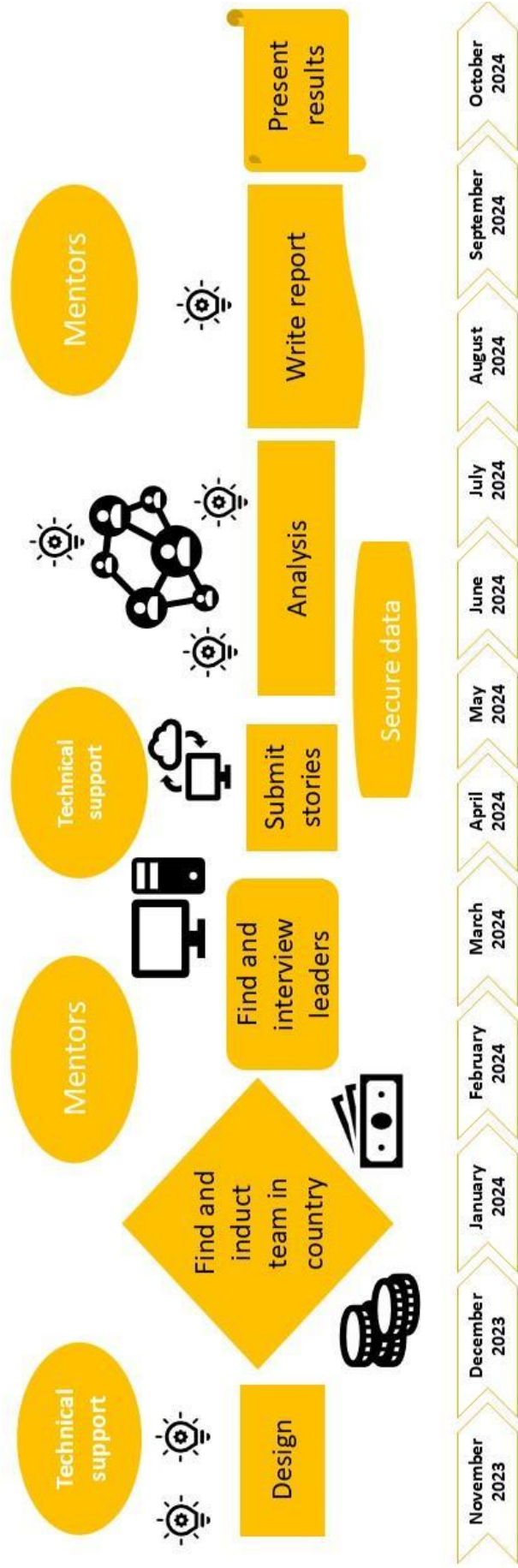The aim of the SoAL project is to capture views of people of African heritage on what constitutes effective African leadership through the analysis of emergent patterns in the data.
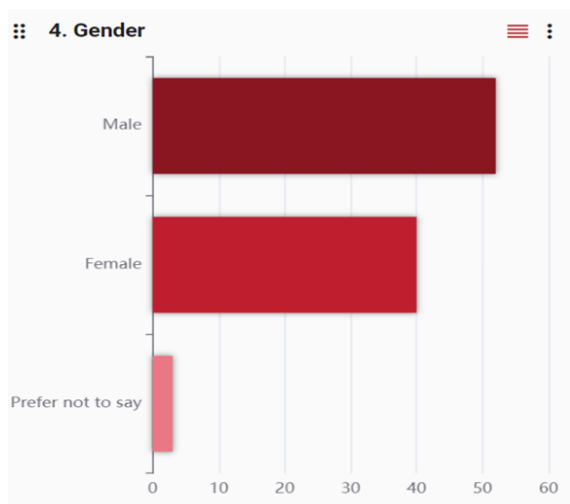


The sample is balanced in terms of gender representation, with 55% male and 42% female leaders. The stories from personal experience had a predominantly positive tone, where the average experience of the leader was more than 8 years.

# Stories of African Leadership road map

Design

Technical support

Find and induct team in country

Mentors

Find and interview leaders

Technical support

Submit stories

Secure data

Analysis

Write report

Mentors

Present results

| November 2023 | December 2023 | January 2024 | February 2024 | March 2024 | April 2024 | May 2024 | June 2024 | July 2024 | August 2024 | September 2024 | October 2024 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|

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# Methodology

The intention of this research was to enable new patterns to emerge from a defined demographic of people, who are leaders in a business environment, through their stories of good leadership.

Following consultation with our technical partners, Cynefin's SenseMaker® framework presented a possible solution. The results are presented through a series of graphical representations predefined by us, the researchers.

## Using SenseMaker® to Understand the African Perspective on Leadership

Our dataset comprises both audio interviews and written accounts from leaders, offering a diverse range of perspectives. The patterns and interpretations are designed to spark discussion on perceptions of good leadership within the African context. With a sample size of ninety-five stories, our findings offer significant insights.

Our journey began by defining key areas of interest and aligning on research objectives as follows:

| Area of interest | Research objectives |
|---|---|
| How useful is traditional wisdom? | Assess the extent to which traditional wisdom is present in today's African leaders. |
| What new wisdom do we need to formulate for future leaders? | Use leadership stories to inform a new model rooted in African values. |
| How do we increase the diversity of AI data sets to include the Global South? | How to collect and store ethical and authentic data. |

Once we agreed on our objectives, we developed a SenseMaker® framework to capture relevant data. This framework comprised four key components:

1. Experience Prompt: Participants selected one of two opening questions designed to elicit leadership experiences.

2. Leadership Evaluation: Questions to assess leadership elements within the shared experiences.

3. Impact Assessment: Questions evaluating the impact of the stories.

4. Demographic Questions: To provide context and enable deeper analysis.

This is an example of the posters that were used to invite people to attend an event and share their story.



- Share your voice
- Empower a new leader
- Change the African story

**AFRICAN LEADERSHIP GLOBAL**
Connecting Leaders to Indigenous Wisdom

## The Stories of African Leadership Project

Do you have a story you would tell an aspiring leader from your personal experience? This is an initiative that explores and captures the knowledge & inspiring stories of Good Leadership & Entrepreneurship across Africa and the UK.

**Calling all Africans living in the Southwest** 📢
Are you working in the private/public sector
*or* running a business?
Would you like to share your story?

**We would love to hear from you!**

**Please join us at our Bristol Research & Network Event over Tea,**

**Coffee and Cake!**

**31st May 2024 at Gather Round, 15-16 Brunswick Square,**

**St Pauls BS2 8NX**

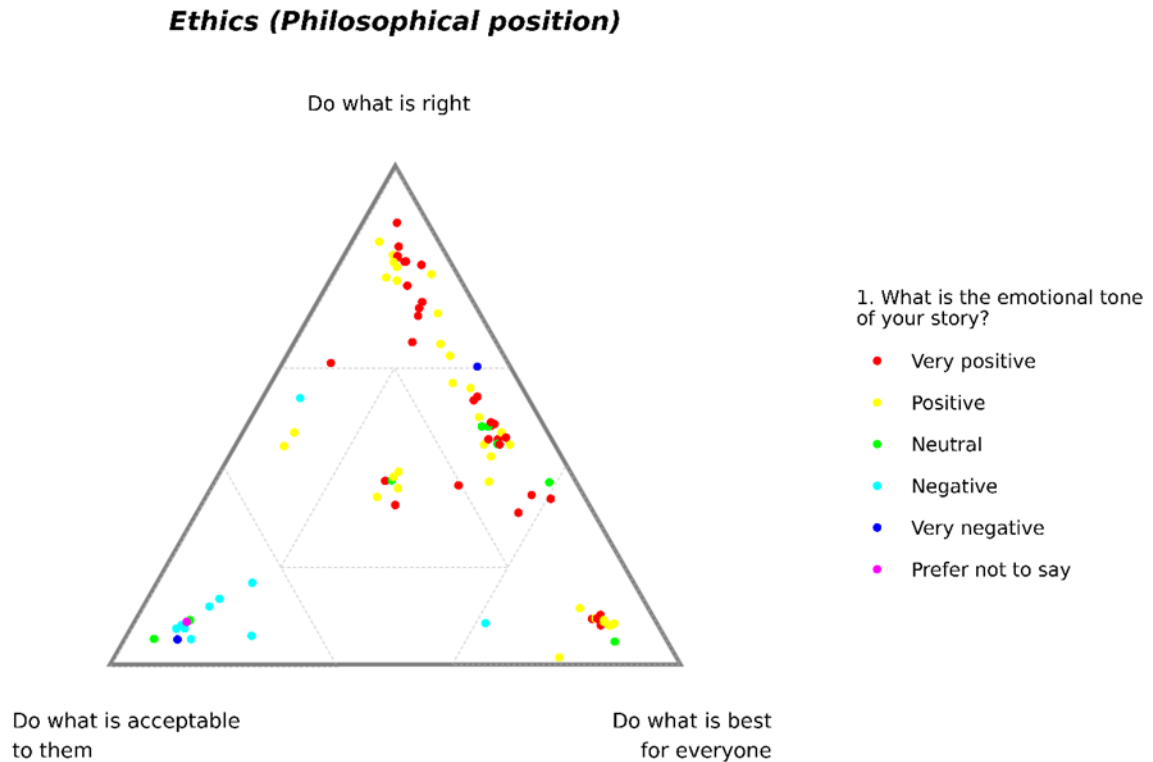**To book your free place: www.africanleadership.global**

## Data Collection

In the UK, we conducted interviews both in-person and virtually. The South African team collected half of their stories via an online conferencing tool, with the remainder gathered in face-to-face meetings. The Ghanaian team conducted all their interviews in person.

Participants were asked to share a leadership story in response to one of our prompts. After sharing their story, participants answered additional questions to provide deeper insights. This self-signification process minimised bias and allowed for a richer understanding of each story. On average, it took participants 30 to 45 minutes to complete the entire process.

While preparing to collect stories, we considered that our presence in the moment could have an impact on how the story was told and, therefore, the emphasis of the outcomes and learning. In the UK, this could, in part, be addressed. However, in Ghana and South Africa, it was of critical importance for the local business professionals, who conducted the interviews, to ensure that they maintained a space for the story to emerge authentically.

## Analysis

We analysed the metadata using SenseMaker's® statistical software. This allowed us to visualise patterns and correlations within the data. For example, in this analysis we were able to explore the relationship between ethical behaviours of leaders and the emotional tone of the stories.

**Ethics (Philosophical position)**



Do what is right

1. What is the emotional tone of your story?
- Very positive
- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative
- Very negative
- Prefer not to say

Do what is acceptable to them

Do what is best for everyone

In this analysis, we examined how different ethical stances - doing what is right, doing what is acceptable to them, or doing what is best for everyone - correlated with positive or

negative emotional tones. The colouring reflected whether the story had either positive (red and yellow) or negative (blue) effects on people. The visualisations highlighted the emotional impact of each stance, offering valuable insights into the ethical dimensions of leadership in an African context.

Our use of SenseMaker® revealed unique benefits that traditional surveys and focus groups often miss. By combining quantitative metrics with rich, narrative-driven insights, we gained a deeper understanding of the challenges African leaders face and the need for a leadership framework that resonates with African experiences.

# Results

In this section, we look at the results pertaining to the perceptions of 'good' leadership according to leaders from South Africa, Ghana and the Diaspora. While initial assumptions and hypotheses were made regarding potential outcomes, this section presents the actual findings derived from the research. These results provide insights that either confirm or challenge our preliminary expectations.



Credit: [PeopleImages](#)

*In the experiences that were shared, the most important person or group was…*
(see Diagram below)

**Important (self appreciation / value )**



You / them

Family / community                    Wider society
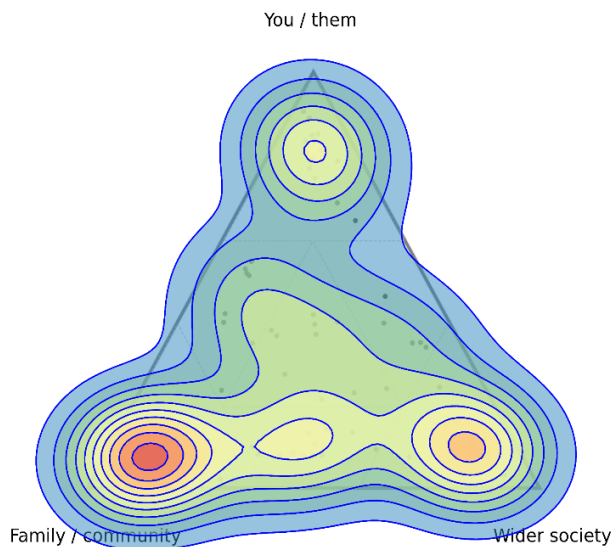
N = 95  n = 94  nN/A = 1  filter n = 94  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 1  mu = L:41 T: 25 R: 34

Leaders who prioritise their personal importance are generally viewed negatively, whereas those who emphasise the importance of family, community, or their team are perceived more favourably. This indicates a clear preference for collectivist leadership approaches over an individualistic one. Metz[31] (2018) agrees that African leaders are frequently regarded as caretakers of their communities, with their main responsibility being to serve, safeguard, and elevate those they lead. This perspective is grounded in the communal values of many African cultures, where the collective well-being takes precedence over personal aspirations.
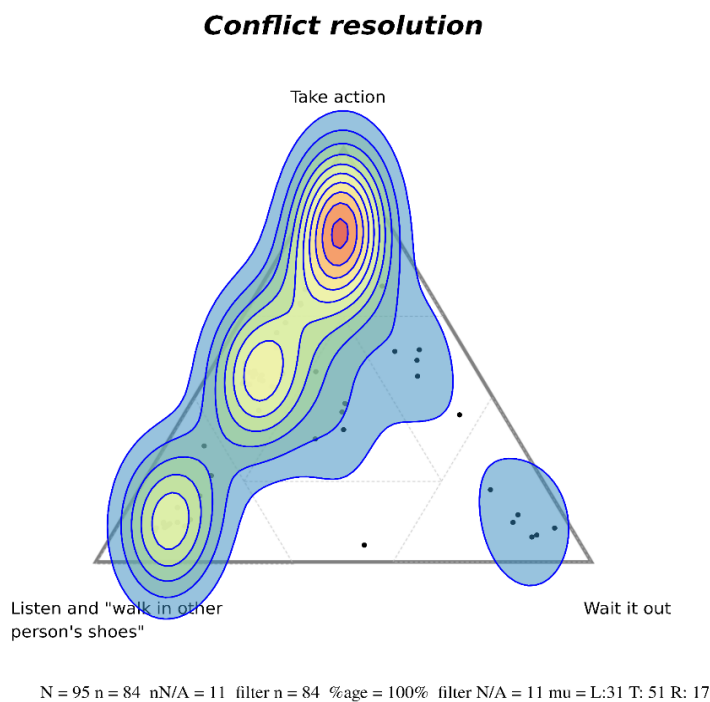
*"He [Ghanian Headmaster] encouraged open communication, creating a safe space for everyone to share their thoughts. This empathetic approach helped build trust and fostered a sense of ownership among the stakeholders.*

*He also collaborated with the community to set a shared vision for the school's improvement. Together, they identified key areas of focus: enhancing academic performance, upgrading infrastructure, and promoting sustainability. This collective goal-setting process ensured everyone was aligned and motivated to work towards a common purpose."*

Young Leader, Ghana

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[31] Metz. T., (2018), African theory of good leadership, African. In *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12 ( 2), November 2018, pp.36-53

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*In the experiences that were shared, conflict is best resolved by…*
(see Diagram below)

### Conflict resolution



Take action

Listen and "walk in other person's shoes"

Wait it out

N = 95  n = 84  nN/A = 11  filter n = 84  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 11  mu = L:31 T: 51 R: 17

The results pertaining to how conflict is resolved suggest that the majority of African leaders (38%) take proactive steps when conflict arises, while 20% prefer to listen and empathise with others' perspectives.

Leaders who take action and show empathy are more admired, whereas those who wait for conflicts to resolve themselves are less respected. This is highlighted in the data, where waiting it out to resolve conflict had a 7% score.

In the African context, conflict is typically resolved through dialogue, consensus-building and restorative justice, prioritising communal harmony. Elders or respected community figures mediate disputes, focusing on reconciliation rather than punishment. The goal is to restore social balance, heal relationships and ensure long-term peace by addressing the conflict's root causes. Solutions aim to benefit the entire community, emphasising unity and collective well-being.[32]
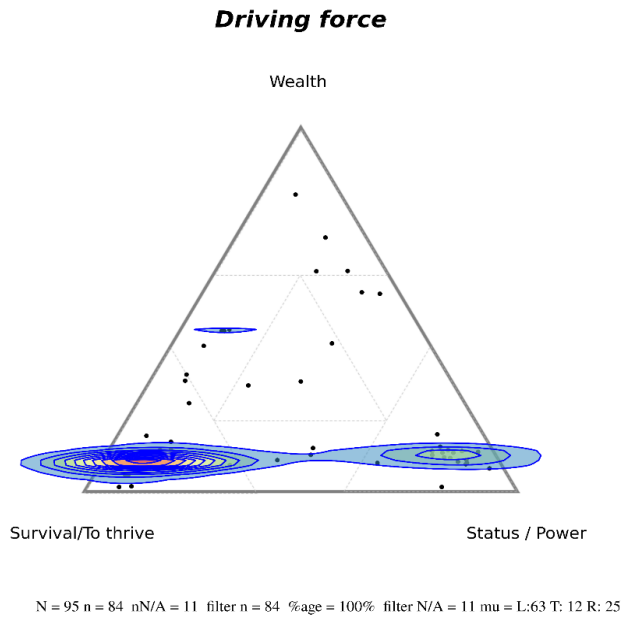
> *"He began by listening"*
>
> Business Leader, Ghana

> *"In African culture, talking loudly is part of the game…But that same loudness when displayed in a way that's unhelpful in the world of work here in the UK, which is the context in which I'm speaking, can be very admonishing. Because in childhood, adults would raise their voice to tell you off – to correct you – and often times, with love. But in the world of work when a boss raises their voice, that is not leadership."*
>
> Business Leader, UK Diaspora (Nigeria)

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[32] Orenge, G.O., (2024), Conflict Management in African Traditional Religion: A Case of the Abagusii Community, ShahidiHub International Journal of Education, Humanities & Social Sciences, 2(1), pp. 1–20

*The leader's main driving force is…*
(see Diagram below)

**Driving force**

Wealth



Survival/To thrive           Status / Power

N = 95  n = 84  nN/A = 11  filter n = 84  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 11  mu = L:63 T: 12 R: 25

There was an overwhelming preference for the driving force being survival/to thrive (60%). Survival and growth appear to be key drivers for African business leaders due to economic instability, limited access to resources and intense competition in the informal economy.

21% had a greater propensity towards status and power.

Entrepreneurs are motivated by the need to support their families and communities, as well as a cultural emphasis on resilience and legacy building. The desire to capitalise on emerging opportunities also fuels their drive to thrive. These factors push African leaders to innovate and adapt to sustain and grow their enterprises amidst the challenges they face locally. It is worth noting that the scores for wealth as a driving force are 5% with 2% between wealth and power/status. 5% of the respondents indicated a balance between thrive/survive and wealth. 4% choose a combination of all three aspects.

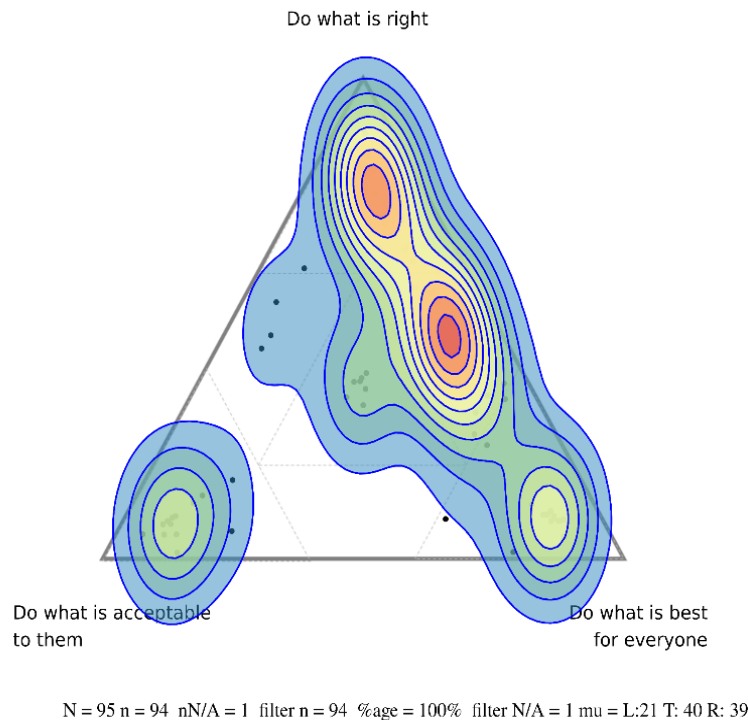Hope for a better future that is attainable is a strong message in these results.

*"My grandmother didn't have any professional qualifications or education because she was born in the 1950s. She taught herself basic Maths literacy and she used the skills of cooking [traditional foods] and became a street vendor.*

*I've learned how to fail and do it again. I've seen my grandmother fail and not give up… making sure she did whatever she can with what little she had."*

Entrepreneur, South Africa

*The leader's philosophical position is...*
(see Diagram below)

## Ethics (Philosophical position)



Do what is right

Do what is acceptable to them

Do what is best for everyone

N = 95 n = 94  nN/A = 1  filter n = 94  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 1  mu = L:21 T: 40 R: 39

A leader's success is often judged by their ability to unite people, earn trust, and guide them toward shared goals[33]. Leadership goes beyond authority; it involves gaining respect and loyalty.

Most respondents believe that their leaders strive to do what is right and best for everyone (28%), or simply what is right (30%). Actions that align with what is only acceptable to the leader are generally correlated with negative perceptions.

African leaders, however, face economic, political, and social challenges beyond their control[34]. Effective leadership demands resilience, adaptability and a deep awareness of the continent's unique issues. Despite these difficulties, there remains a strong focus on ethical leadership and accountability.

*"The main driver that he mentioned to me was do the right thing, all the time. Because the pressure was on him on siding with various member states when it came to some decisions related also, to global international pressure.*

*To be able to turn and say no to those who are able to influence decisions in all ways, using any means, was an example of leadership."*

Senior Leader, Diaspora (Cameroon)

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[33] Piper, L.,  Anciano, F. and Bidla B., (2023), Trust is Personal and Professional: The Role of Trust in the Rise and Fall of a South African Civil Society Coalition, International Journal of Comparative Sociology 65(4), pp. 1-15
[34] Chatham House, 2024, What's at stake for Africa in 2024?

*The leader's main source of knowledge comes from...*
(see Diagram below)

**Source of wisdom (Information / knowledge)**

Traditional wisdom

Academic learning          Practical experience

N = 95  n = 94  nN/A = 1  filter n = 94  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 1  mu = L:24 T: 27 R: 49

According to our respondents, most African leaders rely heavily on practical experience, with 20% using a combination of traditional wisdom and practical experience. Another 23% rely equally on traditional wisdom, academic learning and practical experience combined. This underscores the value placed on real-world experience in leadership.

The combination of Traditional Wisdom and Practical Experience is considered the most valuable which reflects a strong appreciation for the blending of traditional knowledge with practical, hands-on experience. Interestingly, female leaders tend to rely more on either the combination of Traditional Wisdom and Academic Learning or Practical Experience, while men are more likely to use a combination of all three. This question highlights the differing approaches to leadership between genders.

Ultimately, modern leaders often need to navigate their role in contemporary Africa with traditional leadership structures. Colonialism and the post-colonial era deeply influenced African leadership, disrupting traditional structures and imposing foreign governance models. This has created tension between preserving indigenous practices and adapting to modern systems[35][36]. The tension between the "old" and the "new" clearly emerged out of the data.

*"To promote discipline, mentorship and entrepreneurship among his pupils, Master X implemented after-school mentorship programs, pairing students with positive role models from the community. These mentors provided guidance, support, and encouragement, helping students develop essential life skills and build confidence. "*

Young Leader, Ghana

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[35] Igboin, B., (2016), "Traditional Leadership and Corruption in Pre-Colonial Africa: How the Past Affects the Present." *Studia Historia*e Ecclesiasticae 42 (3), pp. 142–160.

[36] Chikerema, A.F. & Nzewi, O., (2020), Succession politics and state administration in Africa: the case of Zimbabwe, Journal of African Elections,19(2), pp.146-167

*The leader's actions are based on...*
*(see Diagram below)*
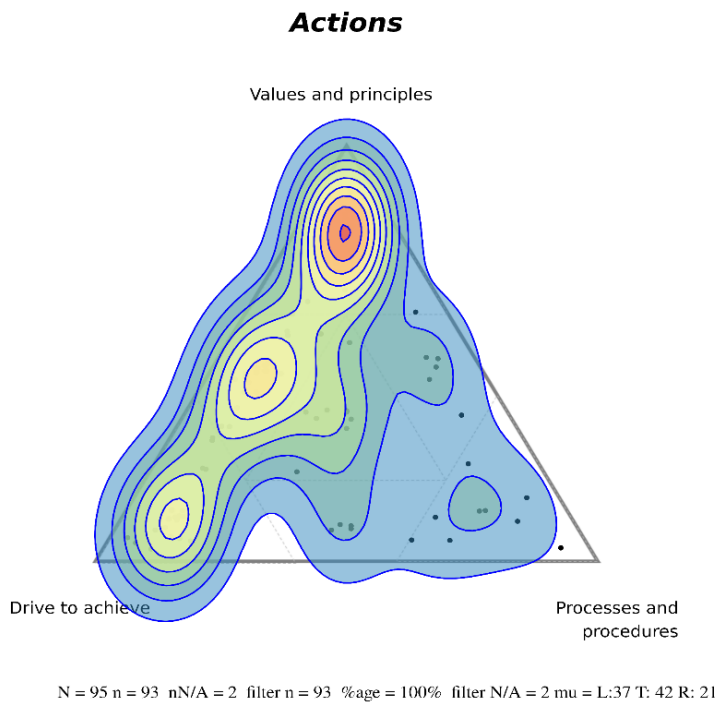
African leadership is deeply shaped by cultural norms, traditions and values. Key factors include respect for elders, the significance of consensus and the influence of traditional leaders. Leadership involves not only having authority, but also preserving harmony and ensuring the continuation of cultural practices[37].

### Actions

Values and principles

Drive to achieve

Processes and procedures

N = 95 n = 93  nN/A = 2  filter n = 93  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 2  mu = L:37 T: 42 R: 21

According to the respondents, a significant portion (29%) of leaders' actions are guided by their values and principles. Additionally, 20% believe both values/principles and a drive to achieve influence actions; similarly, 20% think the drive to achieve is the sole influence. Processes and procedures are not the key determinants for taking action. As experience increases there is a draw towards values and principles as a drive to action. The actions of leaders with more than 10 years of experience gravitate towards values and principles

*"Leadership should be driven by values. In African leadership we can see that many leaders will aim to align…regardless of whether the alignment is the right thing to do at the time, or whether it's actually wrong; wrong for themselves or for the people they are serving.*
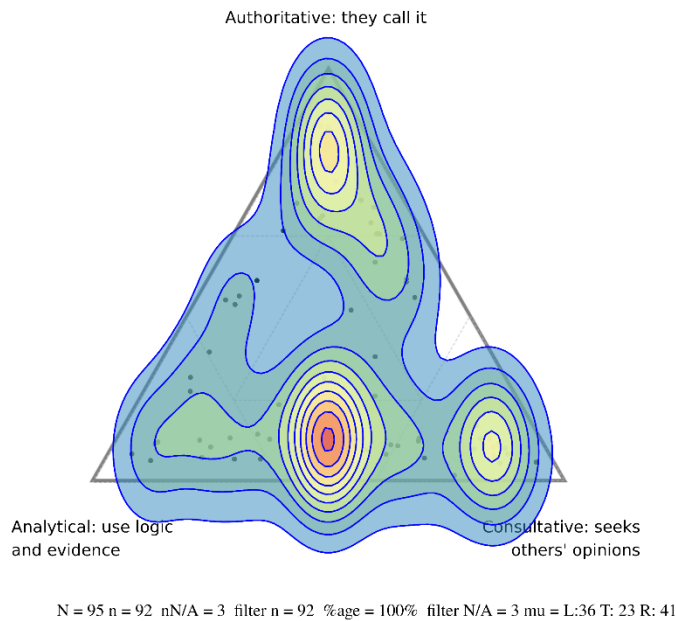
*…But those who stand for the truth, are recognised in the long run."*

Executive, Diaspora (Cameroon)

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[37] Fashola, J.O., (2014), Reawakening African Cultural Practices towards Global Harmony: Role of Kinship, Review of Arts and Humanities June 2014, Vol. 3, No. 2, pp. 101-113

*The leader's decision-making approach is best described as...*
*(see Diagram below)*

### Decision-making approach

Authoritative: they call it

Analytical: use logic
and evidence

Consultative: seeks
others' opinions

N = 95 n = 92  nN/A = 3  filter n = 92  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 3 mu = L:36 T: 23 R: 41

Of the responses 25 % preferred that they took an authoritative approach, with 21% wanting to be consultative. A significant portion (24%) displayed a blend of being analytical and consultative.

It appears therefore that the most respected decisions come directly from the leader only or in consultation with the group, emphasising inclusivity and collective responsibility. However, there is a cultural respect for hierarchy. Either way, the leader is expected to make the final decision either independently or after considering input from others, emphasising how the process values patience, dialogue and mutual respect.
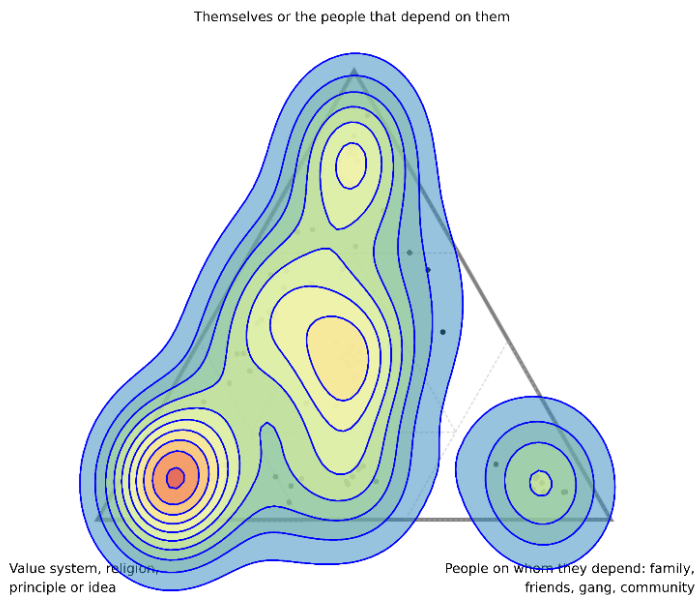
*"Leaders have to make tough decisions and show compassion, many times.*

*Being a leader is difficult because one of the most critical things is making decisions and for every decision you make - most of the time, not everyone's happy or something has to suffer for the other to succeed."*

Business Leader, South Africa

*The leader in the story gets their sense of identity from...*
(see Diagram below)

### Sense of Identity

Themselves or the people that depend on them



Value system, religion, principle or idea

People on whom they depend: family, friends, gang, community

N = 95  n = 92  nN/A = 3  filter n = 92  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 3  mu = L:44 T: 31 R: 25

Our respondents' perceptions of where leaders get their sense of identity from show that 27% believe African leaders derive their sense of identity from their value system, religion, or a guiding principle or idea. Additionally, 17% believe that identity is drawn from a combination of themselves or the people that depend on them, people on whom they depend and their value system, religion, principle or idea.
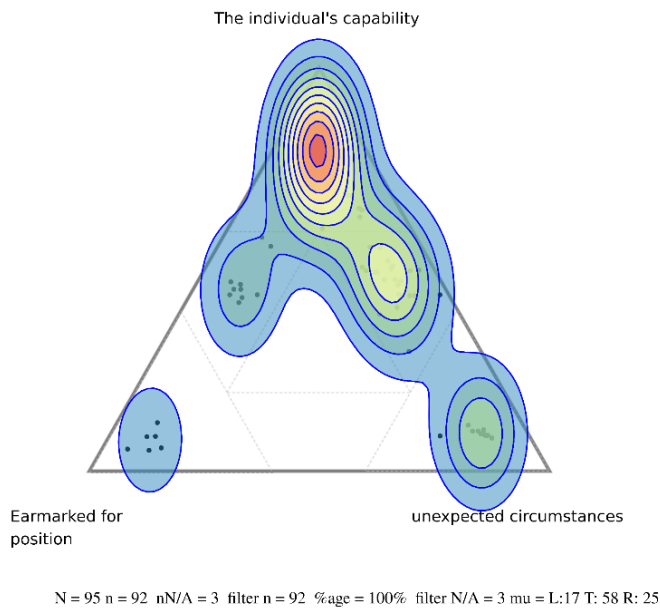
*"Puts the student on the right track. A role model. A gentleman. He consults with the students to get their opinion and understanding of an issue. It gives us the opportunity to think it through. His attitude and behaviour are good. Listens, approachable no matter your status, personality, or weakness. He involves you in solving your own problem.*

*He can lead society to development. He fought for his own students. He researched the best way forward for his students needing to travel to other universities. He liaised with the universities to see what they provided. He checked the studies were good enough and followed up visiting for a week. Mentoring his students in their new environments and helped them with challenges."*

Aspiring Leader, Ghana

*The leader's conception of taking on a leadership role is based on...*
(see Diagram below)

**Conceive of taking a leadership role**



The individual's capability

Earmarked for
position

unexpected circumstances

N = 95  n = 92  nN/A = 3  filter n = 92  %age = 100%  filter N/A = 3  mu = L:17 T: 58 R: 25

In taking on a leadership role 45% indicated that capability was the key attribute over unexpected circumstances and being earmarked for the position. 24% perceive that leaders take on the role because of the combination of unexpected circumstances and their own capabilities.

Only 7% believe that the leader would have been earmarked for the position. One explanation could be that Africans often believe that few leaders are earmarked for leadership because traditional African cultures view leadership as a sacred duty bestowed upon individuals with exceptional qualities. These individuals are thought to possess innate wisdom, moral integrity and a deep connection to the community's values. Therefore, leadership is not seen as a role for everyone but as a calling for those who demonstrate resilience and the ability to unify and serve the community.

*"A woman, though not in any position of official authority, had a reputation for her resourcefulness and problem-solving skills. She called a meeting with the vendors and proposed a community cleanup day.*

*Her leadership had turned the tide, proving that effective action did not always require official titles. Her ability to inspire and organize the community showcased what true leadership looked like. The woman was invited to join the Market Committee as a representative. Her practical approach and dedication to the market's well-being were qualities that everyone recognized as essential for future leadership."*

Aspiring Leader, Ghana

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# Discussion

What attracted us to this work is the realisation that African cultural norms are often suppressed in organisations, both by the Africans themselves and by the rest of the world. While there are well known (and practiced) solutions, there are also many rich ways of arriving at a solution.

To date, looking at the exploration of leadership, much of the published literature, accepted theories, measurement, and assessments are based within a Western theoretical framework. In the UK, the predominant theories behind many frameworks are Psychodynamic[38][39], Behavioural[40][41] Humanist[42][43] and Jung's (1971) typology tests of psychological orientation[44]. Many leadership assessment instruments are based on variations of these theories with data and research sourced from groups of well-educated students studying in the Northern hemisphere.

Since this report is led by African voices, the emerging themes provide us a unique perspective on how business leaders perceive their roles.

The results from this research show that the majority of African leaders based their actions on their values and principles. Those who took action based on their drive to achieve alone were perceived negatively. Specifically, leaders with over 20 years' experience tended to vote for values and principles as their guiding tenet. Interestingly, the stories they told were more than 10 years old, meaning the story had longevity (cue oral tradition of sharing wisdom). On the other hand, those with 4 to 6 years of leadership experience tended to place their selection between drive to achieve and values and principles. Although there are a number of readings towards the drive to achieve, they are not all positive. This raises the question:

*If it is recognised that survival or the need to thrive is critical for many, why is an individual's ambition to be successful perceived negatively?*

Furthermore, authoritativeness was perceived negatively as a successful strategy. There is a paradox where subordinates 'await orders' from their superiors yet they do not admire the 'they call it' approach to the decision-making of authoritarian leaders. Emerging leaders identified a need for leaders in situ to use logic and evidence while also seeking others' opinions when making decisions. It would be useful to explore further how a leader uses their authority in order to build trust.

Navigating conflict presented some interesting results. The participants' responses demonstrate a preference for taking action as a means to resolve conflict. In particular,

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[38] Freud, S., Strachey, J., Freud, A., Rothgeb, C. and Richards, A., (1953). The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud. London: Hogarth Press.

[39] Erikson, Erik H., (1994). Identity and the Life Cycle. New York, NY: WW Norton.

[40] Skinner, B. F., (1988). About Behaviourism. New York, NY: Random House.

[41] Watson, J. B., (1930). *Behaviourism* (revised edition). University of Chicago Press.

[42] Rogers, C. R., (1959). A theory of therapy, personality and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centred framework. In (ed.) S. Koch, *Psychology: A study of a science. Vol. 3: Formulations of the person and the social context*. New York: McGraw Hill.

[43] Maslow, A. H., (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, Vol 50, pp. 370-96.

[44] Jung, C.G., (1971). 'General Description of the Types', in Psychological Types, Collected Works vol. 6, Ch. X, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

almost all the people that have gone through the University of Life preferred taking action as a way of resolving conflict, whereas those with formal academic qualifications did not agree on whether taking action is positive. While some believe this is an acceptable way forward, others prefer leaders that listen and walk in the other's shoes. Leaders who wait it out are not revered.

In the current climate where many DEIB (Diversity, Equality, Inclusion and Belonging) initiatives are failing, it is critical to understand how the personality of a culture informs an organisation's approach to mitigating conflict. Where the West focuses on individual personalities and their preferences, we must consider the personality of the group of people in question. For example, when managing conflict in the spirit of *Ubuntu* (African philosophy that emphasises the interconnectedness of humans), one would take the issue up with the community council. Ubuntu communities prioritise communal welfare over personal gain and in the context of conflict, encourage reconciliation, forgiveness and restorative justice.[45]

What struck us about our storytelling methodology is that it allowed the interviewer to hold a space for any leader to tell their story and feel heard. It allowed each person to be their authentic selves and share their perspective in a non-judgemental environment. The stories collected equally made mention of how a person or group wants to be treated. In particular, aspiring leaders recognised that the most effective leaders are those that are already members of the community that has a need to be served - they are connected to the problem.

Therefore, thinking about succession planning, it follows that it would only serve to benefit the community if there was greater intergenerational dialogue. Interestingly, the more experienced leaders appear to be more aligned in their opinions, whilst those in their mid-career and younger have a diverse view of how the world works across all the questions we asked. For example, younger leaders value academic experience and practical experience as their source of wisdom, whilst their ethics helicopter between doing what is right and doing what is best for everyone. On the contrary, more experienced leaders value traditional wisdom in tandem with academic learning and practical experience.

In the example of the young leader from Ghana referring to his former lecturer, he refers to the lecturer's manner as "harsh" but goes on to say "The older ways of the older people put you on the right track… He finds it difficult to accept the modern generation. He compares the past with the present and looks to the future. Taking notes is a priority for him. We say listening is more important."

The differences in the approach to learning suggest an opportunity for knowledge exchange as both sides have a lot to learn from one another. However, this would require both older and younger leaders to have a mutual intuition of their roles in succession planning.

Additionally, there are transformative African projects, such as Lelapa AI[46], that are working hard to reflect the diversity of their users. We are interviewing urbanised business leaders who are building businesses that will serve African consumers. Rural communities in Africa

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[45] Ngomane, M., (2019) Everyday Ubuntu: Living better together, the African way Pub: Transworld Publishers
[46] Lelapa AI

can make up to 85% of a country and these are the consumers of the future[47]. Rural communities are naturally more connected to the land, to their natural environment, to indigenous knowledge. What we are seeing in the data is that as communities move away from their natural environments towards modernisation, so does their thinking shift towards modern paradigms.

The participating leaders are telling us that they are operating in a modern context that upholds the common belief that Africans are increasingly disconnected from traditional wisdom. Is indigenous knowledge being ignored, adapted or integrated into the business language of the West (and East)? This project offers the idea that there is room for indigenous knowledge in international business.

Through this research we are delivering on one of our goals of contributing to the Global South data to reduce bias in AI algorithm development. One may argue that there are inherent biases in being an international team, however, being deliberate about establishing local research teams is one way we are addressing this issue.

Challenging ourselves in our own biases we reflected on the surprisingly limited evidence of African wisdom in the stories we had collected. However, the number of countries that integrate their Indigenous Knowledge policies into their business dialogue are also limited. A deeper analysis revealed that there were behaviours associated with the traditional wisdom that we were looking for. Some of the aspiring leaders demonstrated these traits in new ways:

*"She is a passionate advocate for youth development and social impact, with a particular focus on empowering rural African youth. She has a wealth of experience in the non-profit sector, not only through leading her own organisations but also by actively supporting others.*

*Her dedication extends to serving on the board of a startup, further highlighting her commitment to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. Currently, she leads an initiative providing vital mentorship and guidance to young girls from rural and suburban communities in Ghana."*

Aspiring Leader, Ghana

We now find ourselves looking at the emerging data for fresh ways of identifying wisdom. However, to validate these insights and ensure their broader applicability, additional targeted data collection and research will be required. Our goal is to reconnect leaders to their indigenous knowledge in order to prepare them to serve local communities better - the customers of the future.

Through the multitude of conversations, debates and reflections, what we know is that our role is to open up the channels that allow Africa to speak for herself.

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[47] Statista (2024), Share of rural population in Africa from 2000 to 2023, Sep 12, 2024.

# Now what?

We are building a community of future thinking leaders, and we are working on the next three countries to contribute to this vision. We would like to extend an open invitation for you to join our initiative.

Your experiences could contribute to insights that shape the next generation of products and services celebrating Africa. More importantly, joining our community will enhance your own leadership potential as you will be connected to a network of people who are also seeking to build a future thinking model of leadership.

Here are several ways in which you can collaborate with us:

- Join the ALG LinkedIn group
- Share this report with others
- Tell your story
- Become an Interviewer
- Build a local Team of Interviewers
- Sponsor a Team of Interviewers
- Become a Mentor

Our main goal at African Leadership Global is to collect one thousand stories per African country, which identify the wealth of wisdom hidden in the histories, backgrounds and experiences of leaders.

Our secondary goal is to build lasting partnerships with entrepreneurs and organisations that we can support in the development of their own Afrocentric products and services.

Our third goal is to contribute to Global South data sets that inform the next generation of Algorithms and technologies.

Follow us on LinkedIn
Find us on our Website
Email us at hello@africanleadership.global

"*Because I've heard all these stories coming out of South Africa, it was almost as if I could see her world and I was right there with her*."

- Gamu Matarira

"*The richness of Indigenous Knowledge that has evolved from many centuries of leadership, mixed with the courage of today's leaders makes for a promising future for all.*"

- Nicola Strong