
**ASSESSING THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN LEADERSHIP
APPROACHES, TEAM DYNAMICS, AND PERFORMANCE
OUTCOMES IN SOCIAL WORK PROJECTS AT DZALEKA REFUGEE
CAMP**

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Article Received: 27 December 2025, Article Revised: 16 January 2026, Published on: 05 February 2026

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DOI: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijarp.1229>

ABSTRACT

This study examined the interplay between leadership approaches, team dynamics, and performance outcomes in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp, Malawi. A mixed-methods descriptive correlational design was employed, drawing quantitative data from 100 project staff and qualitative insights from 15 key informants, including project managers and coordinators. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, while qualitative data from interviews and focus group discussions were thematically analyzed. Findings revealed that transformational leadership was the most prevalent approach and was strongly associated with positive team dynamics, including effective communication, trust, and collaboration, which in turn enhanced project performance outcomes. Conversely, authoritarian leadership styles were associated with reduced team morale and lower project efficiency. The study highlights the importance of adaptive and participatory leadership in resource-constrained and culturally diverse humanitarian settings. The findings have implications for leadership training and capacity-building programs aimed at strengthening social work project performance and improving service delivery to refugee populations.

KEYWORDS: *Leadership approaches; team dynamics; performance outcomes; social work; refugee camp.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dzaleka Refugee Camp, established in 1994 and currently hosting over 42,000 refugees, presents a complex operational environment for social work initiatives in Malawi. Social work projects in such contexts face persistent challenges, including limited resources, high service demand, and culturally diverse teams. These conditions underscore the critical role of leadership in shaping team processes and influencing project outcomes.

Leadership style has been widely recognized as a determinant of team dynamics and organizational performance (McCleskey, 2014; Northouse, 2021). In humanitarian contexts, leadership not only affects operational efficiency but also influences service quality, staff motivation, and beneficiary satisfaction. Team dynamics—such as communication, role clarity, trust, and conflict management—often mediate the relationship between leadership and performance outcomes (Salas et al., 2018).

Transformational leadership, characterized by inspiration, motivation, and individualized consideration, has been associated with improved project performance and team satisfaction (Liu et al., 2020). Conversely, rigid or authoritarian leadership approaches may suppress innovation and reduce team cohesion, particularly in dynamic and resource-constrained environments. Despite extensive literature on leadership and team dynamics, empirical studies focusing on refugee camp social work projects, especially within Malawi, remain limited. This study therefore seeks to address this gap by examining how leadership approaches interact with team dynamics to influence performance outcomes in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

To assess the interplay between leadership approaches, team dynamics, and performance outcomes in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

Specific Objectives

1. To identify the leadership approaches employed in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.
2. To examine the nature of team dynamics within social work project teams at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.
3. To analyze the relationship between leadership approaches, team dynamics, and performance outcomes in social work projects.

2. Literature Review

The global refugee crisis remains one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of the twenty-first century, with millions of individuals displaced due to conflict, persecution, and political instability (UNHCR, 2020). Refugees often experience multidimensional challenges, including poverty, trauma, and barriers to social integration. Social work plays a central role in addressing these challenges through advocacy, psychosocial support, and community development initiatives.

Leadership is a critical factor influencing the effectiveness of social work projects. Northouse (2019) identifies transformational, transactional, and servant leadership as key approaches shaping team motivation and performance. Transformational and democratic leadership styles have been associated with higher employee engagement and improved service outcomes in social work and humanitarian contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2019; Yukl, 2020). In contrast, authoritarian leadership is frequently linked to reduced morale and creativity, which are essential for effective social work practice (Barker, 2019).

Team dynamics refer to the patterns of interaction among team members that influence group functioning and performance. Key elements include communication, cohesion, role clarity, and conflict resolution (Salas et al., 2015). In high-stress environments such as refugee camps, positive team dynamics are particularly important for sustaining staff wellbeing and project effectiveness (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Performance outcomes in social work projects encompass both quantitative indicators, such as efficiency and service delivery rates, and qualitative measures, including stakeholder satisfaction and community impact (Healy, 2017). The literature emphasizes the importance of adaptive leadership that integrates task-oriented and relational approaches to enhance team effectiveness and project sustainability.

A notable gap in the literature is the limited availability of empirical studies focusing specifically on leadership and team dynamics within refugee camps in Malawi, including Dzaleka Refugee Camp. Most existing studies focus on health, education, or refugee policy more broadly. This study is anchored in Transformational Leadership Theory and Servant Leadership Theory, which emphasize leader influence on motivation, collaboration, and performance, providing a relevant framework for understanding leadership in refugee camp social work projects.

3. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-methods descriptive–correlational design was adopted to examine the relationships among leadership approaches, team dynamics, and performance outcomes.

Study Population and Sample

The study targeted staff and volunteers involved in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. A quantitative sample of 100 respondents was selected, alongside 15 key informants, including project managers and coordinators, for qualitative interviews.

Sampling Techniques

Stratified random sampling was used for the quantitative survey to ensure representation across leadership levels and team roles. Purposive sampling was employed to select key informants for qualitative interviews and focus group discussions.

Data Collection Methods

Primary data were collected using structured questionnaires measuring leadership approaches, team dynamics, and performance outcomes. The Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire was used to assess leadership styles. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to obtain in-depth qualitative insights. Secondary data were obtained from project reports and organizational records.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS to generate descriptive statistics and correlation coefficients. Qualitative data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns related to leadership practices and team dynamics.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from relevant authorities. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was secured, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the study.

4. RESULTS

The study examined how leadership approaches interact with team dynamics to influence performance outcomes in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. Respondents were predominantly aged 26–35 years, with 55% male and 45% female participants.

Leadership Approaches

Transformational leadership (40%) and participatory leadership (30%) were the most prevalent approaches, followed by transactional leadership (25%). Laissez-faire leadership was least practiced (5%).

Table 1. Leadership approaches practiced in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp (n = 100).

Leadership Style	Frequency	Percentage
Transformational	40	40
Transactional	25	25
Participatory	30	30
Laissez-faire	5	5

Note. Data are based on responses from project staff and volunteers involved in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp.

Team Dynamics

A majority of respondents reported effective communication (78%), high levels of trust (80%), and strong teamwork (85%). These factors were perceived to positively influence project performance.

Performance Outcomes

Efficiency and effectiveness were rated as high by 60% and 55% of respondents, respectively. Sustainability was rated moderately, indicating challenges in long-term project continuity. Leadership approaches showed a positive correlation with team dynamics ($r = 0.65$) and performance outcomes ($r = 0.58$), while team dynamics were also positively correlated with performance outcomes ($r = 0.62$).

Qualitative findings supported the quantitative results, indicating that inclusive and motivational leadership enhanced team cohesion and productivity, whereas directive leadership ensured compliance but limited sustainability.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that leadership approaches significantly shape team dynamics and performance outcomes in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. The predominance of transformational leadership aligns with previous studies emphasizing its effectiveness in humanitarian and social work contexts (Bass & Riggio, 2019). Strong correlations between leadership, team dynamics, and performance outcomes confirm the mediating role of team processes, such as communication and trust, in achieving project success (Salas et al., 2018). Teams led by transformational leaders exhibited higher cohesion and engagement, while authoritarian approaches were associated with reduced morale and weaker outcomes. These results reinforce the importance of adaptive leadership capable of responding to the complex and resource-constrained nature of refugee camp environments.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study highlights the critical role of leadership in influencing team dynamics and performance outcomes in social work projects at Dzaleka Refugee Camp. Transformational and participatory leadership approaches were found to enhance team cohesion, communication, and overall project effectiveness. Strengthening leadership capacity in refugee camp settings is therefore essential for improving service delivery and ensuring sustainable social work interventions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Social work practitioners and project leaders should adopt transformational and participatory leadership practices, promote inclusive decision-making, and invest in regular team-building activities. Non-governmental organizations and policymakers should support structured leadership training programs tailored to refugee contexts and invest in sustainability measures to ensure long-term project impact.

Future research should employ longitudinal designs to examine causal relationships and explore the influence of contextual factors such as resource availability and cultural diversity.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Mike Kalitera conceptualized the study, designed the methodology, collected and analyzed the data, and drafted the manuscript. The supervisor provided academic guidance, methodological oversight, and manuscript review. All authors approved the final manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Materials

None.

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