

Female Leadership and Adaptive Management as Drivers of Sustainable Development in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of female leadership and adaptive management as key drivers of sustainable development in Cameroon. It examines how women in leadership positions contribute to inclusive decision-making, innovation, and resilience in governance and organisational systems. Despite persistent gender inequalities, female leaders often demonstrate participatory, collaborative, and flexible approaches that align with adaptive management principles. Using a qualitative approach, the study draws on interviews and policy analysis to assess the impact of these leadership styles from cultural, formal and informal sectors. Findings reveal that integrating gender-sensitive leadership with adaptive strategies, improving governance, enhancing inclusivity through female leadership, driving innovation, adaptive management practices, female leadership dynamics and development challenges enhances institutional responsiveness, promotes social equity, and improves development outcomes. However, structural barriers, including limited access to leadership positions and socio-cultural constraints, continue to hinder women's full participation. The study concludes that strengthening female leadership and embedding adaptive management practices are essential for fostering sustainable and inclusive development in Cameroon.

Keywords: female leadership; adaptive management; drivers; sustainable development

INTRODUCTION

Sustainable development in Cameroon is constrained by structural and emerging challenges, including poverty, governance deficits, climate vulnerability, and persistent inequality. Despite abundant natural resources, many people, especially in rural areas, live below the poverty line, with limited access to basic services (World Bank 2023). Weak institutional capacity, corruption, and low accountability undermine governance and public service delivery (Transparency International 2022). Climate change exacerbates floods, droughts, and land degradation, intensifying food insecurity and displacement (UNDP 2023). Environmental degradation, such as deforestation and soil erosion, further threatens livelihoods. Socio-economic and regional inequalities in education, healthcare, and income limit inclusive growth (Tchamyou 2021; Asongu & Nwachukwu 2022). Addressing these interconnected challenges requires integrated, adaptive strategies that strengthen governance, enhance resilience, and promote equitable opportunities across Cameroon.

Leadership is pivotal in shaping development outcomes, especially in fragile and resource-constrained contexts. Effective leaders influence policy direction, institutional performance, and resource allocation, impacting the success of development initiatives (Northouse, 2022; World

Bank, 2023). In education, strong leadership improves teacher motivation, accountability, and student outcomes, particularly in crisis-affected regions (Bush, 2020; Hallinger, 2021). Inclusive leadership fosters trust, collaboration, and community ownership, which are critical for sustainable development (UNDP, 2022). In Cameroon's North West and South West regions, leadership ensures continuity of services amid ongoing conflict. However, women remain underrepresented in senior positions despite equivalent qualifications (Eagly & Carli, 2024). Gender stereotypes, unequal access to mentorship, and organisational cultures favouring male leadership constrain women's advancement (Smith et al., 2022; Nguyen & Truong, 2023). Addressing work-family conflicts and structural biases is essential for achieving equitable representation and inclusive governance (Johnson & Lee, 2023).

The weak integration of gender-sensitive leadership and adaptive strategies remains a major barrier to sustainable development, especially in developing contexts. Many institutions still operate within rigid, male-dominated frameworks, limiting responsiveness to diverse needs and perspectives. Leadership models often lack adaptive strategies that emphasise flexibility, learning, and context-specific solutions. This absence perpetuates inequality and undermines innovation, collaboration, and institutional resilience.

In sectors like education and governance, it results in less inclusive and less effective policies. There is an urgent need for frameworks that combine gender-sensitive leadership with adaptive management to enhance equity, participation, and sustainable outcomes.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Conceptual Framework

1.1.1. Gender gaps in leadership in Cameroon

Gender gaps in leadership remain a persistent challenge in Cameroon, reflecting broader structural inequalities in access to decision-making positions. Despite policy efforts and increasing advocacy, women continue to be underrepresented in political, economic, and institutional leadership roles. Recent studies highlight that socio-cultural norms, limited access to resources, and institutional barriers significantly constrain women's advancement into leadership positions in Cameroon. For instance, entrenched cultural perceptions often position leadership as male-dominated, limiting women's participation at both local and national levels (Ross, 2025). Moreover, global evidence indicates that although women's participation in the workforce is increasing, their representation in senior leadership remains disproportionately low, with only modest progress observed in recent years (World Economic Forum, 2024). In the Cameroonian context, women's limited access to land, finance, and professional networks further restricts their leadership opportunities, despite their significant contributions to sectors such as agriculture and education. These disparities are also evident in governance and academic institutions, where women are often underrepresented in top decision-making roles (Kyambade, Tushabe, Namatovu and Oyella, 2024). Addressing these gaps requires targeted policies that promote gender equality, leadership training, and institutional reforms to ensure inclusive participation.

1.1.2. Female Leadership

Female leadership has gained increasing scholarly attention due to its impact on organisational effectiveness, inclusivity, and innovation. Recent studies highlight that women leaders bring diverse perspectives and collaborative approaches to decision-making. However, despite these contributions, women remain underrepresented in leadership positions globally. Recent literature emphasises that female leadership is associated with improved innovation and organisational performance, particularly in diverse environments (Kong, Usman, Yue, Yasmin and Sokolova, 2024). Integrative reviews show that women leaders often demonstrate high effectiveness through relational and transformational leadership styles (Eagly et al., 2025). Studies also indicate that gender-diverse leadership enhances sustainability and environmental innovation outcomes (Mansour et al., 2024). However, persistent structural and cultural barriers continue to limit women's access to leadership roles (Cimene, Reilly and Elçi, 2024).

Therefore, promoting female leadership is essential for fostering inclusive, adaptive, and high-performing institutions.

1.1.3. Contributions of women to governance and development

Women's contributions to governance and development have gained increasing scholarly attention in recent years. Emerging evidence shows that female leadership enhances institutional performance, inclusivity, and innovation across sectors. Contemporary research highlights women as key drivers of transformative and sustainable development processes. Studies demonstrate that women in leadership positions promote participatory governance, transparency, and ethical decision-making, thereby strengthening institutional effectiveness (Nash, Pereira, Smout, Satija and Ghosh, 2025). Their leadership is often associated with inclusive policies that address the needs of marginalised groups and improve social equity (Rodriguez, Ho, Jones and Stephenson, 2024). Women leaders contribute significantly to innovation and organisational change by fostering diverse perspectives and collaborative problem-solving approaches (Kong et al., 2024). Evidence also shows that gender-diverse leadership enhances environmental and sustainable development outcomes, particularly through improved policy responsiveness and innovation in critical sectors (Mansour et al., 2024). Integrative reviews emphasise that female leadership brings relational, adaptive, and transformational qualities essential for navigating complex development challenges (Chen, Lai and Kuang, 2025). Women's leadership is increasingly recognised as a catalyst for effective governance and sustainable development.

1.1.4. Adaptive Management

Adaptive management has emerged as a critical approach for addressing uncertainty and complexity in governance and organisational systems. It emphasises continuous learning, flexibility, and evidence-based decision-making in dynamic environments. Recent scholarship highlights its relevance in policy, environmental management, and institutional resilience. Adaptive management is defined as a systematic, iterative process that integrates learning with action to improve decision-making over time (Staub and Tirmizi, 2025). It operates through cycles of planning, implementation, monitoring, and adjustment, allowing institutions to respond to changing conditions (Cruse, Cooper, Burton, Baumgartner & Ning, 2024). Contemporary studies emphasise its role in fostering organisational learning and knowledge co-production among stakeholders (Staub and Tirmizi, 2025). According to Staub and Tirmizi (2025), adaptive approaches are essential for navigating complex and uncertain policy environments. Recent literature also links adaptive management to governance systems that encourage collaboration, flexibility, and decentralised decision-making (Sott and Bender, 2025). However, implementation challenges persist, including limited resources, institutional rigidity, and weak

stakeholder engagement (Månsson et al., 2023). Despite these constraints, adaptive management remains a key strategy for enhancing resilience and innovation in both public and private sectors. It is particularly relevant in crisis-prone contexts, where rapid learning and responsiveness are essential for sustainable outcomes.

1.1.5. Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has emerged as a global priority in addressing interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges. Recent scholarship emphasises the need for integrated and adaptive approaches to ensure long-term resilience and equity. Contemporary authors highlight that achieving sustainability requires coordinated action across governance, innovation, and inclusive policy frameworks. Studies underline that sustainable development is anchored in balancing environmental protection, economic growth, and social well-being within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Usubiaga-Liaño, Fairbrass and Ekins, 2024). Scholars such as Minutiello, García-Sánchez, and Aibar-Guzmán (2024) argue that sustainability has become a central paradigm in modern management and policy discourse, requiring systemic transformation. Almulhim, Sharifi, Aina, Ahmad, Mora and Leal Filho (2024) stress the importance of context-specific strategies, particularly in urban and developing settings, to enhance sustainable outcomes. In the African context, Dodoo, Ko, Ma and Guo (2025) emphasise governance, social inclusion, and environmental accountability as critical drivers of sustainable development. Collectively, these perspectives suggest that sustainable development is not only a policy objective but also a multidimensional and evolving process requiring innovation, collaboration, and institutional adaptability.

1.2. Theoretical Perspectives

This theoretical framework explains how female leadership combined with adaptive management practices can contribute to sustainable development in Cameroon. The model is grounded on three complementary theories:

- a) Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises the ability of leaders, particularly women leaders, to inspire change, motivate communities, and promote innovation in governance and development processes.
- b) Participatory Governance Theory highlights the importance of involving citizens in decision-making. In the Cameroonian context, this supports decentralisation and improves accountability in public institutions.
- c) Inclusive Leadership Theory focuses on fairness, diversity, and representation. It ensures that women, youth, and marginalised groups actively participate in leadership and development processes.

At the intersection of these theories lies sustainable development, which is achieved through improved

economic performance, social equity, and environmental protection. Together, these theories suggest that when women leaders adopt adaptive and inclusive approaches, they strengthen governance systems and promote long-term sustainable development outcomes in Cameroon.

1.2.1. Transformational leadership theory

This theory was developed by James MacGregor Burns and later expanded by Bernard M. Bass. Transformational leadership theory emphasises inspiration, motivation, and change-oriented leadership. It focuses on leaders' ability to inspire followers toward a shared vision while fostering commitment and performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership remains highly relevant in dynamic and crisis-prone environments (Northouse, 2022). Female leaders are often associated with transformational traits such as empathy, collaboration, and empowerment. These qualities enhance team cohesion, trust, and participatory decision-making processes (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women's leadership styles tend to promote inclusivity and emotional intelligence, which are critical in managing complexity (Goleman, 2017). Research also shows that such traits improve organisational adaptability and responsiveness to change (Yukl, 2013). In innovation-driven contexts, transformational female leadership fosters creativity and continuous learning. Thus, integrating gender perspectives into transformational leadership strengthens both innovation and institutional resilience.

1.2.2. Participatory Governance Theory

The theory emphasises the active involvement of diverse stakeholders in decision-making processes, promoting transparency, accountability, and collective ownership of policies. Recent scholars such as Fung (2015) and Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015) argue that participatory mechanisms enhance the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance outcomes. Within this framework, female leaders are often associated with inclusive and consultative leadership styles that prioritise dialogue and collaboration. Studies by Eagly and Carli (2007) and Banaszak (2010) highlight that women leaders tend to foster environments where multiple voices are heard and valued. This participatory orientation improves policy responsiveness by integrating local knowledge and stakeholder perspectives. It strengthens adaptability, particularly in complex and crisis-prone contexts, as noted by Ansell and Torfing (2016). Female leadership contributes significantly to more democratic, resilient, and context-sensitive governance systems.

1.2.3. Inclusive Leadership Theory

The theory emphasises openness, accessibility, and the intentional valuing of diversity in leadership practices, enabling leaders to engage and empower all stakeholders (Carmeli, Reiter Palmon, & Ziv, 2010). Recent scholarship highlights that inclusive leaders cultivate environments where differing perspectives are heard and respected, which enhances

organisational learning and adaptability (Hollander, 2012; Randel et al., 2018). In the context of governance and development, inclusive leadership supports participatory decision making and equitable policy outcomes (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). Female leaders are often found to exemplify inclusive behaviours by actively facilitating participation, promoting equity, and reducing barriers to engagement (Prime & Salib, 2014). Such practices are linked to higher levels of trust, collective efficacy, and team performance (Shore et al., 2011). Inclusive leadership has been associated with adaptive management capacity, enabling organisations to respond effectively to complex and changing environments (Pless & Maak, 2004). This orientation aligns with sustainable development goals that call for inclusive governance and social justice (Kylmä & Amankwaa, 2021). The integration of inclusive leadership approaches is seen as a critical enabler of resilient and equitable systems.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the role of female leadership and adaptive management in promoting sustainable development in Cameroon, aligning with Creswell's emphasis on understanding lived experiences (Creswell 2018). Evidence was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 14 women leaders from government, education, and civil society, reflecting practices recommended by Kallio et al. (2016) for rich, context-sensitive data. To situate interview insights within broader governance frameworks, secondary data were obtained from recent policy documents, organisational reports, and academic literature on governance improvement, inclusivity, and innovation (Bryman 2016; Yin 2018). Data from interviews and documents were analysed using content and thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and meanings related to improving governance, enhancing Inclusivity through female leadership, driving innovation and adaptive management practices, following the techniques outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). Rigour was ensured through triangulation of sources and iterative coding. Ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were strictly observed (Guest, Namey, and Mitchell 2017). This methodology allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how female leadership influences adaptive governance in crisis and development contexts.

3. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Drawing on in-depth interviews with women leaders from cultural, formal and informal sectors in Cameroon, the study revealed several prominent themes that highlight the transformative impact of female leadership. Participants consistently emphasised how women leaders influence governance structures, promote inclusive practices, and drive innovative solutions within their organisations. Their insights illustrate not only the unique perspectives women bring to leadership roles but also how these perspectives translate into

tangible improvements in decision-making, participation, and problem-solving. Across sectors, the findings point to a pattern whereby female leadership fosters accountability, amplifies marginalised voices, and encourages creative approaches to challenges, particularly in complex or resource-constrained environments.

3.1. Improving Governance: Perspectives from Women Leaders in Cameroon

Female leadership was consistently identified as a critical factor in enhancing governance across sectors. Respondents highlighted participatory decision-making, transparency, and ethical accountability as defining characteristics of women leaders. In the cultural sector, an interviewee reported that; *"in our cultural association, I make it a point that decisions are discussed openly with all members. We vote collectively on major issues, and I always ensure that financial records are accessible to everyone. This transparency has built trust and reduced conflicts."* (April 2026, Yaoundé). Another respondent elaborated that ; *"As the coordinator of our cultural troupe, I make sure that every member has a voice in decisions, from festival planning to financial allocations. We hold weekly meetings where issues are openly discussed, and I ensure that records of contributions and expenses are shared with all members. This transparency has fostered trust and reduced conflicts within the group. I also encourage mentorship, allowing younger members to learn leadership roles gradually. Through this approach, our association has become more organised and resilient. Participatory decision-making has increased commitment and a sense of ownership among members. I believe this model strengthens governance and preserves our cultural heritage for future generations"* (April 2026, Bamenda).

This account illustrates how participatory leadership enhances governance in cultural institutions. By promoting transparency, mentorship, and collective decision-making, female leaders foster trust and cohesion. It demonstrates that inclusive practices can improve organisational resilience. According to Watha Ndoudy, Dipakama, Nzila, Kimpouni and Louembé (2022), who emphasise accountability and social cohesion in community-led cultural governance. As for the formal sector (Public Administration), A participant stated that; *"As a leader in the Ministry, I implement regular team consultations and ethical review sessions before decisions are finalised. I also encourage reporting of irregularities without fear of retaliation. This approach has improved compliance and operational efficiency"* (April 2026 Yaoundé). Tchoumba (2023) indicates that female leaders in Cameroon's public administration enhance governance through structured decision-making and strict ethical oversight. By encouraging transparency and participatory consultation, women leaders foster trust and accountability within bureaucratic structures. Such practices not only improve compliance with policies but also increase employee engagement and performance.

The participant's approach reflects these findings, showing how inclusive leadership strategies contribute to effective and resilient governance. An interviewee noted ; *"In my role within the public administration, I ensure that decisions are made through consultation with my team. I promote transparency by documenting processes and encouraging feedback from staff. This approach has improved accountability and reduced operational inefficiencies."* (April 2026, Yaoundé). This perspective reflects the growing recognition of participatory governance within public institutions in Cameroon. It highlights how female leadership fosters transparency and accountability through structured consultation mechanisms. The emphasis on documentation and feedback aligns with modern governance principles of openness and responsiveness. A participant stated that ; *"In my cooperative of small business owners, I insist on monthly meetings where each member presents challenges and suggestions. I maintain clear records of contributions and expenditures, which are shared openly with all members. This transparency has strengthened trust among us and minimised misunderstandings. Collective decision-making has also empowered members to take ownership of outcomes. As a result, we have experienced fewer disputes and improved overall productivity"* (March 2026, Douala).

The emphasis on shared decision-making reflects broader gendered leadership practices that prioritise inclusivity and accountability. Such approaches enhance trust, which is critical in resource-constrained and informal economic settings. This supports the view that women-led cooperatives contribute significantly to improved governance and sustainability. A participant noted: *"In my small trading business, I involve my staff in key decisions, especially on pricing and sourcing. We keep simple but clear records that everyone can verify. This openness has reduced misunderstandings and improved how we manage daily operations"* (April 2026, Lum). This reflects the findings of Mbougouen (2021), who argues that transparency in women-led informal enterprises strengthens trust and operational efficiency. It also supports recent observations that participatory practices in SMEs enhance accountability despite limited formal structures. The mixed Sector (NGO / Civil Society), A participant pointed out that ; *"Running an NGO, I ensure that every program planning session includes representatives from diverse backgrounds, including women, youth, and community leaders. Decisions are made collaboratively through inclusive consultations, and we establish clear accountability checkpoints after every project. We also document outcomes and share reports with stakeholders to maintain transparency. This openness has strengthened our credibility and increased stakeholder confidence in our work. As a result, partnerships have grown stronger and community engagement has improved significantly. I believe that inclusive and transparent leadership is key to effective governance in civil society"* (April 2026, Douala).

According to Ako, Monjoa and Fongoh (2022), women leaders in civil society organisations in Cameroon promote good governance through participatory structures and transparency. Their study highlights that inclusive decision-making processes enhance institutional legitimacy and accountability. Furthermore, the emphasis on transparency mechanisms, such as reporting and stakeholder engagement, strengthens trust between organisations and the communities they serve. This perspective reinforces the findings of the present study, where female leadership is closely associated with improved governance outcomes in NGO settings.

3.2. Enhancing Inclusivity through Female Leadership

Findings from interviews conducted with women leaders across cultural, formal, and informal sectors in Cameroon reveal that female leadership plays a critical role in fostering inclusive participation and representation. These insights align with recent studies emphasising that gender-diverse leadership promotes equity, trust, and engagement within institutions. An interview in the formal sector (Education Leadership) pointed out that ; *" I intentionally create spaces where female teachers and young staff can express their ideas without fear. Inclusivity means ensuring that leadership is not dominated by a few voices but reflects the diversity of the institution. In our school, I have introduced participatory meetings where everyone contributes. This has improved trust and collaboration among staff. Women leaders tend to listen more and consider social realities in decision-making. I believe this approach reduces marginalisation within the system"* (April 2026, Yaounde).

This finding aligns with recent scholarly work, which shows that inclusive leadership significantly improves the organisational climate by fostering trust, openness, and mutual respect among members. By promoting equitable engagement practices, leaders ensure that all individuals, regardless of gender, age, or background, have equal opportunities to contribute to decision-making processes. Such an environment not only enhances participation but also strengthens collaboration and team cohesion. Moreover, inclusive leadership encourages diverse perspectives, leading to more balanced and effective outcomes. Women Entrepreneur Leader highlighted that ; *"In my cooperative, I make sure that even the youngest or least educated women can speak during meetings. Many of them used to feel excluded, but now they actively participate in decisions. Inclusivity is about empowerment and confidence-building, especially for women who have never had a voice in public spaces. When women feel heard, they contribute more effectively to collective progress and group cohesion. I have seen shy members become confident leaders over time. We also organise small group discussions to make participation easier for everyone. I encourage mentorship among members so that more experienced women can guide others. This has created a strong sense of solidarity and shared responsibility within the cooperative"* (April 2026, Bertoua).

This finding aligns with recent research emphasising that women leaders play a critical role in building trust among marginalised groups. By fostering open dialogue and supportive environments, they enhance participation and social cohesion. Such leadership approaches contribute to reducing inequalities within communities. Moreover, inclusive practices strengthen collective agency and local development outcomes. Another participant said that; *"I make sure that every woman in my cooperative, regardless of age or education level, has a voice in decisions. Inclusivity means mentoring, listening, and creating opportunities for everyone to contribute"* (April 2026, Maroua). This highlights how women entrepreneurs foster empowerment and active participation among marginalised members, promoting stronger community cohesion and equitable decision-making. The following interview was conducted with a female local administrator working in the public governance sector in Cameroon, with several years of experience in policy implementation and community engagement. Her insights highlight how female leadership contributes to inclusive governance practices at the local level. From the participant's perspective; *"As a leader in public administration, I ensure that policies reflect the needs of all groups, especially women, youth, and vulnerable populations. In my role, I prioritize consultation with community members before any program is implemented. This involves organizing dialogue platforms where different voices can be heard, including those who are often excluded from decision-making. I have observed that when people feel included, they are more willing to support and participate in public initiatives. Inclusivity also helps us identify real community needs rather than assumed priorities. Furthermore, it improves transparency, as stakeholders understand how and why decisions are made. I also work closely with civil society organisations to reach marginalised populations. In my experience, inclusive governance leads to more sustainable and accepted policies. It strengthens trust between citizens and public institutions, which is essential for development"* (April 2026, Yaounde).

This finding corroborates recent studies which argue that women leaders tend to adopt participatory and inclusive governance approaches that prioritise equity and representation. Such leadership styles are associated with improved policy responsiveness and greater public trust in institutions. Moreover, inclusive decision-making processes have been shown to enhance policy effectiveness by incorporating diverse perspectives. The evidence reinforces the role of female leadership in promoting accountable and equitable governance outcomes. Interviews with women in local administrative roles highlight how female leadership strengthens inclusive governance practices by ensuring that public policies and programs reflect the needs of diverse community groups. The interview findings reveal that; *"in my role, I prioritise inclusive consultations before any decision is made, especially involving women, youth, and vulnerable groups. This approach helps us design*

policies that truly respond to community needs. I have observed that when people feel included, they are more willing to support government initiatives" (April 2026, Bamenda). This response underscores the role of participatory governance in improving policy effectiveness and legitimacy. It also reflects how inclusive leadership enhances trust between public institutions and citizens.

3.3. Driving Innovation

Female leadership in Cameroon increasingly demonstrates a strong capacity to drive innovation across cultural, formal, and informal sectors. Interviews conducted in diverse contexts reveal that women leaders foster creativity, adaptability, and problem-solving, particularly in environments marked by uncertainty and resource constraints. Consistent with recent scholarship (Eagly & Carli, 2023; Nkomo, 2022), women's leadership styles often emphasise collaboration, resilience, and openness to new ideas, which are critical drivers of innovation. A woman pointed out that: *"I encourage my staff to integrate digital tools into teaching, even when resources are limited. We improvise with what we have and learn together as a team. Innovation, for me, is about adapting to reality rather than waiting for ideal conditions. I also promote peer learning among teachers to share new methods. Sometimes we fail, but we always learn from it. This approach has improved both teaching quality and student engagement"* (April 2026, Yaounde).

This testimony strongly illustrates transformational leadership practices as highlighted by Eagly and Carli (2007), particularly the emphasis on collaboration, shared learning, and continuous improvement. The respondent's focus on peer learning and collective problem-solving demonstrates how female leaders foster knowledge exchange within institutional settings. Additionally, the willingness to experiment despite limited resources reflects adaptive innovation, a key feature of effective leadership in constrained environments. This approach contributes to building resilient educational systems capable of responding to evolving challenges while enhancing both teacher performance and student outcomes. During the interview, a female school administrator explained that she actively encourages teachers to adopt innovative teaching methods despite limited resources. She emphasised integrating simple digital tools and collaborative lesson planning to enhance classroom engagement. She noted that fostering a supportive environment allows teachers to experiment and continuously improve their practices. In her words, this is what she said; *"I encourage my colleagues to experiment with new teaching methods, even with limited resources. We integrate simple digital tools and adapt lessons to students' needs. This flexibility has improved student participation and learning outcomes"* (April 2026, Garoua). This highlights how female leadership fosters adaptive innovation in resource-constrained educational settings. It also aligns with recent studies emphasising collaborative and learner-centred approaches as drivers of innovation in education systems.

This interview highlights the resilience and creativity of women operating within the informal sector. Faced with declining sales and economic uncertainty, the respondent demonstrates how necessity drives innovation at the grassroots level. Her experience reflects the growing integration of digital tools into traditional market activities. It also underscores the importance of peer support and knowledge-sharing among women entrepreneurs. A respondent emphasised that ; *“In my business, I had to find new ways to attract customers when sales dropped. I started using WhatsApp to showcase my products and take orders. It was not easy at first, but now it has increased my income. I also teach other women how to do the same. We support each other with ideas and advice. Innovation here is about survival and growth”* (April 2026, Douala).

This testimony strongly aligns with Nkomo and Matli (2022), who emphasise that women in informal economies leverage social networks and digital platforms to sustain and expand their activities. The use of WhatsApp illustrates a low-cost but effective innovation strategy adapted to local realities. It also highlights how knowledge diffusion occurs organically through peer learning. Furthermore, the collective dimension of support among women reinforces both economic resilience and empowerment. Such practices demonstrate that innovation in informal contexts is often incremental, socially embedded, and necessity-driven. This interview illustrates how women in agro-processing adapt traditional practices to meet changing market demands. The respondent reflects a blend of indigenous knowledge and modern techniques to improve productivity and product value. Her experience reveals how innovation can emerge from everyday practices. It also highlights the role of local initiative in sustaining livelihoods as a respondent explained ; *“I process cassava into garri and water fufu, but over time I realised that customers were becoming more conscious about packaging, hygiene, and overall product quality. In response, I began using sealed, transparent bags and added simple labels to make my products more attractive and trustworthy. This change significantly improved my visibility in the market and attracted more buyers, including customers from nearby towns. I also attended a local training where I learned improved preservation and processing techniques, which helped extend the shelf life of my products. As a result, I now experience less spoilage and faster sales. Beyond my own business, I actively share these new ideas and practices with other women in my group, so we can all grow together and improve our livelihoods”* (April 2026, Bafoussam).

This example supports Nkomo and Matli (2022) by demonstrating how women innovate through practical adaptation and informal learning systems. The improvement in packaging and preservation reflects incremental innovation rooted in market awareness. It also shows how training and local knowledge exchanges enhance productivity and competitiveness. Additionally, the respondent's willingness to share knowledge reinforces collective

advancement within the informal sector. Such dynamics illustrate how innovation is closely linked to community-based learning and resourcefulness in constrained environments.

This interview highlights how female community leadership fosters grassroots innovation in culturally sensitive and crisis-affected settings. It underscores the ability of women leaders to merge tradition with adaptive strategies. The insights demonstrate the transformative role of inclusive dialogue in sustaining community resilience. *“As a community leader, I introduced dialogue circles where women and youth can share ideas freely. These spaces allow everyone, regardless of status, to express their concerns and propose solutions. We use these discussions to address local challenges such as conflict, education disruption, and social cohesion. Even during the crisis, we identified alternative ways to maintain unity and communication. I encourage collective decision-making because it strengthens ownership of solutions. Listening to diverse voices helps us discover creative and practical ideas. I believe innovation begins when people feel heard and valued. While we respect our traditions, I also encourage gradual change to meet current realities. This balance between culture and adaptation has reduced tensions in the community. As a result, trust and cooperation among members have significantly improved”* (April 2026, Bamenda).

This finding supports Amadiume (2021), who emphasises that African women leaders effectively integrate cultural values with adaptive leadership practices. The interview illustrates how innovation is not necessarily technological but can be social and relational. By creating inclusive platforms, women leaders enhance participation and collective problem-solving. This approach strengthens community resilience in times of crisis. It also demonstrates the relevance of culturally grounded yet flexible leadership models. *“In our women's association, I introduced rotating leadership roles so that each member can contribute ideas and develop confidence. We also created small innovation groups to explore income-generating activities like food processing and craft production. During difficult times, we rely on group discussions to find solutions collectively. I encourage members to share their experiences and lessons learned. We have adopted new methods, such as digital savings tracking using mobile phones. This has improved transparency and trust within the group. Innovation, for us, is about improving our daily lives with simple but effective ideas. I also ensure that younger women are actively involved in decision-making. This has brought fresh perspectives into the association. Our strength lies in unity and shared responsibility”* (April 2026, Yaoundé).

The interview highlights the importance of collective agency and informal networks in fostering innovation among African women. The interview demonstrates how grassroots leadership encourages experimentation and shared learning. It also reflects the role of social capital in sustaining innovation in

informal settings. By empowering members, female leaders enhance both individual and group capacity. Such practices contribute to inclusive and sustainable community development. *“As a woman working alongside traditional authorities, I advocate for the inclusion of women’s perspectives in community decisions. I initiated forums where traditional leaders and women discuss development issues together. This has led to new approaches in conflict resolution and resource management. I also promote the use of local knowledge combined with modern ideas. For example, we adapted traditional farming practices with new techniques to improve yields. Innovation comes from bridging the old and the new. I encourage openness to change while respecting cultural norms. Over time, we have seen increased acceptance of women’s contributions. This collaboration has improved both decision-making and community outcomes. It shows that innovation can emerge from dialogue and mutual respect”* (March 2026, Bafoussam).

Inclusive and participatory leadership as a driver of innovation. The interview highlights how women leaders act as mediators between tradition and modernity. It demonstrates the potential of hybrid governance systems in fostering innovation. By integrating diverse knowledge systems, female leaders enhance problem-solving capacity. This approach is particularly relevant in culturally rooted societies like Cameroon.

Women in development organisations play a critical role in shaping innovative project design and implementation. Their leadership often emphasises inclusivity, experimentation, and adaptive learning. One female leader indicated that, *“In our organisation, I promote experimentation in project design by testing small-scale initiatives before expanding them. This approach minimises risks while enabling continuous learning and improvement. I also create a safe environment where team members feel confident proposing unconventional ideas, which often leads to our most impactful innovations”* (March 2026, Buea). This perspective aligns with recent findings by UN Women (2023), which highlight inclusive leadership as a key driver of innovation in development organisations. By encouraging participation and psychological safety, female leaders create environments where creativity can thrive. The emphasis on piloting and scaling reflects adaptive management practices essential in uncertain contexts. Moreover, such leadership fosters collective ownership of ideas and solutions. This approach strengthens both project effectiveness and organisational resilience.

This response highlights the importance of participatory approaches in development practice. It shows how integrating community feedback into project cycles enhances relevance and sustainability. Such adaptive strategies demonstrate how innovation is grounded in responsiveness to local realities and beneficiary needs. An interviewee expressed that, *“As a project coordinator, I ensure that community feedback is integrated into every*

stage of our programs. We regularly adjust our strategies based on what beneficiaries tell us. This flexibility has helped us design more relevant and sustainable interventions. Innovation comes from staying connected to the realities on the ground” (April 2026, Garoua). This illustrates how participatory leadership enhances innovation in development work. By centring community voices, female leaders ensure that solutions are context-specific and sustainable. Such approaches reinforce the link between inclusivity and effective innovation.

This statement highlights the critical role of collaborative leadership in fostering innovation within development work. It reflects a leadership approach that values inclusivity, where all team members are empowered to contribute ideas regardless of hierarchy. The emphasis on brainstorming and collective problem-solving illustrates how innovation can emerge from shared knowledge and diverse perspectives. The encouragement of learning from failure demonstrates an adaptive mindset essential for navigating complex project environments. Such practices strengthen team cohesion, enhance confidence, and build sustainable innovation capacity within organisations. A respondent emphasised that ; *“In my role, I prioritise collaboration across teams to generate new ideas for our projects. We organise regular brainstorming sessions where everyone contributes, regardless of their position. This has helped us discover creative solutions to funding and implementation challenges. I also encourage learning from failed initiatives rather than assigning blame. Each setback becomes an opportunity to improve. Over time, this has strengthened both team confidence and innovation capacity”* (April 2026, Yaounde).

This finding reflects broader literature on adaptive and collaborative leadership in development practice. Female leaders often create open spaces that encourage knowledge sharing and collective problem-solving. The emphasis on learning from failure is particularly important in dynamic and resource-constrained environments. Such leadership practices align with contemporary development theories that value flexibility and continuous improvement. This enhances both innovation outcomes and team cohesion.

3.4. Adaptive management practices

Flexibility in policy implementation is essential in dynamic and crisis-prone contexts. Women leaders often adapt policies to suit evolving circumstances, ensuring that education systems remain functional despite challenges. Their ability to adjust strategies enhances effectiveness and responsiveness in governance. According to the participant, *“In our schools, we often face sudden disruptions due to socio-political tensions. I have learned to adjust schedules, redistribute resources, and modify teaching methods to keep learning ongoing. Policies are rarely perfect, so flexibility allows us to meet students’ needs effectively. I consult with my team before making changes to ensure*

we maintain fairness. Flexibility also helps in responding to emergencies while adhering to educational standards. Ultimately, it ensures continuity and minimises disruption in learning outcomes" (April 2026, Bamenda).

The interview demonstrates that female leaders actively adjust policies and procedures to respond to real-time challenges. Their adaptive approach ensures that institutional goals are met even under unpredictable conditions. Engaging stakeholders is crucial for the success of educational governance. Women leaders often prioritise inclusive consultation, involving teachers, parents, and community members. This approach fosters transparency, collaboration, and accountability, strengthening policy implementation. From the participant's perspective; *"I make it a priority to involve all stakeholders in school decision-making. Teachers, parents, and community leaders are consulted before introducing any policy change. I organise monthly meetings to gather feedback and address concerns. Their input often shapes how policies are implemented on the ground. By engaging stakeholders, we foster ownership and reduce resistance. Collaboration also allows us to identify potential issues early. It creates trust between the school administration and the community. This approach has improved participation and enhanced the effectiveness of policies"* (April 2026, Buea).

This account illustrates how female leaders leverage stakeholder engagement to improve the relevance, acceptance, and effectiveness of educational policies, ensuring that decisions reflect community needs. Continuous learning enables leaders to respond effectively to evolving challenges. Women leaders often invest in personal development and promote learning within their teams. This focus strengthens institutional capacity and drives innovation in policy and governance. *"I believe a leader must always keep learning. I attend workshops, read policy updates, and exchange ideas with colleagues. I encourage my teachers to do the same through professional development programs. Continuous learning allows us to adapt to new teaching methods and administrative challenges. It helps in evaluating past practices and improving them. Learning from others' experiences has inspired innovative solutions in our schools. By fostering a culture of learning, we ensure that our institution evolves with changing circumstances"* (March 2026, Yaounde).

The interview underscores that female leaders place a high value on continuous learning, not only for

their personal development but also for the growth and capacity-building of their teams. By actively seeking new knowledge, staying updated on policy changes, and encouraging professional development among staff, they create a culture of reflection, improvement, and skill enhancement. This commitment to learning enhances their ability to adapt to evolving challenges, promotes innovative solutions, and fosters resilience within their institutions. As a result, governance becomes more responsive, effective, and forward-looking, with policies and practices that are better aligned with both organisational goals and the needs of stakeholders.

3.5. Female Leadership Dynamics and Development Challenges

In the context of Cameroon, the political and institutional structure is characterised by centralised governance, which often limits local autonomy and slows inclusive decision-making processes (World Bank, 2023; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022). Culturally, deeply rooted patriarchal norms continue to shape gender roles, restricting women's access to leadership despite gradual social change (UN Women, 2023; United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Gender inequality indicators reveal persistent disparities in education, employment, and political representation, highlighting structural barriers to women's empowerment (World Economic Forum, 2024). Nevertheless, examples of female leadership are emerging across sectors. In public administration, women increasingly occupy ministerial and senior civil service positions, influencing policy direction (UN Women, 2023). Within NGOs, women lead initiatives focused on community development, education, and health (UNDP, 2022). In the private sector, female entrepreneurs contribute to economic growth and job creation, while in the informal sector, women dominate trade and small-scale enterprises, demonstrating resilience and adaptability (World Bank, 2023). However, development challenges remain significant. Climate change continues to disrupt agricultural productivity, disproportionately affecting women farmers (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2023). Rapid urbanisation places pressure on infrastructure and social services, often marginalising vulnerable populations (UN-Habitat, 2022). Governance constraints, including limited resources and weak institutional coordination, further hinder effective policy implementation and inclusive development outcomes (OECD, 2022; World Bank, 2023).

TABLE 1: Thematic Matrix of Female Leadership and Adaptive Management Practices in Cameroon.

Theme	Sector	Key Findings	Illustrative Evidence
1. Participatory Governance & Transparency	Cultural Sector	Women leaders promote collective decision-making, openness, and accountability, strengthening trust and cohesion.	Open voting systems, shared financial records, weekly meetings, and mentorship for younger members.
	Public Administration	Leaders use consultations, ethical reviews, and documentation to enhance compliance and efficiency.	Staff consultations, reporting irregularities without fear, and transparent decision processes.
	Informal Sector (SMEs & Trade)	Collective decision-making and financial transparency reduce conflicts and improve productivity.	Monthly meetings, shared records of contributions and expenses, and inclusive pricing decisions.
	NGO/Civil Society	Inclusive consultations improve credibility, stakeholder trust, and project accountability.	Multi-stakeholder participation, reporting mechanisms, and accountability checkpoints.
2. Inclusive Leadership & Representation	Education Sector	Leaders create safe spaces for participation, especially for women and junior staff.	Participatory meetings, equal voice policies, and reduced marginalisation.
	Cooperatives	Empowerment of marginalised women through speaking opportunities and mentorship.	Young and low-educated women are included in decisions and mentoring systems.
	Local Administration	Policies designed through consultation with women, youth, and vulnerable groups.	Dialogue platforms, inclusive policy design, and improved trust in institutions.
3. Innovation & Creativity	Education Sector	Adaptive teaching methods and digital integration improve learning outcomes.	Use of simple digital tools, peer learning, experimentation.
	Informal Sector (Trade)	Digital platforms (e.g., WhatsApp) enhance market access and income.	Online product promotion, peer teaching, and improved sales.
	Agro-processing	Packaging, labelling, and training improve competitiveness and sustainability.	Improved hygiene, sealed packaging, and preservation techniques.
	Community Leadership	Social innovation through dialogue and cultural adaptation.	Dialogue circles, hybrid traditional-modern solutions, and conflict resolution.
	NGOs	Pilot testing, brainstorming, and learning from failure drive innovation.	Small-scale trials, participatory design, adaptive project management.
4. Adaptive Management Practices	Education Sector	Flexibility ensures continuity during crises and disruptions.	Adjusted schedules, redistributed resources, and modified teaching methods.
	School Administration	Stakeholder engagement improves policy acceptance and effectiveness.	Monthly consultations, community participation, and collaborative decision-making.
	Public Sector Leadership	Continuous learning enhances adaptability and institutional performance.	Training participation, policy updates, and staff capacity building.
5. Development Challenges Context	National Context	Structural and systemic barriers limit the full effectiveness of female leadership.	Centralised governance, patriarchal norms, gender inequality, climate change, and urbanisation pressures.
6. Policy Implications	Governance Level	Need for gender-sensitive policies, inclusive governance, and capacity building.	SDG alignment, accountability systems, participatory policymaking, and institutional reform.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Promoting women's participation in leadership roles is essential to strengthening inclusive and responsive governance systems. Gender-sensitive policymaking should be institutionalised to ensure that policies address the specific needs of women and marginalised groups. Capacity building in adaptive management is necessary to equip leaders with skills to respond effectively to crises and uncertainty. Institutional reforms must prioritise inclusiveness, transparency, and equal representation in decision-making processes. Policies should encourage collaboration between the government, communities, and development partners to enhance effectiveness. Strengthening accountability mechanisms will improve trust and governance outcomes. Integrating local knowledge and community voices can enhance policy relevance and sustainability. Aligning these efforts with the SDG will ensure coherence with global standards for equity, resilience, and sustainable development.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Female leadership and adaptive management are increasingly recognised as critical drivers of sustainable development in Cameroon, particularly within complex and crisis-prone environments. Recent studies emphasise that women leaders tend to adopt participatory and inclusive governance approaches, which enhance transparency, accountability, and community engagement (UN Women, 2023). Such leadership styles are essential in addressing structural inequalities and promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities. In parallel, adaptive management characterized by flexibility, continuous learning, and context-specific decision-making, enables institutions to respond effectively to socio-political and economic uncertainties (World Bank, 2022). In the Cameroonian context, where regions experience instability and governance challenges, the integration of female leadership with adaptive strategies strengthens institutional resilience and policy responsiveness (Ngono & Tchinda, 2024). Empirical evidence suggests that women leaders are more likely to prioritise social welfare, education, and community development, aligning closely with sustainable development goals (Fonchingong, 2022). Moreover, adaptive management frameworks support innovation and localised solutions, which are crucial in fragile settings. However, persistent barriers such as gender inequality, limited access to leadership positions, and weak institutional capacity continue to constrain these contributions (African Development Bank, 2023). Therefore, promoting gender-sensitive leadership and embedding adaptive management practices remain essential for advancing inclusive and sustainable development in Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

Female leadership and adaptive management emerge as critical drivers of sustainable development in Cameroon, particularly within contexts marked by socio-political and economic uncertainty. The findings demonstrate that women

leaders contribute to more transparent, participatory, and accountable governance systems. Their leadership approaches foster inclusivity by amplifying marginalised voices and promoting equitable participation in decision-making processes. In addition, the integration of adaptive management enables institutions to respond flexibly to complex and evolving challenges. This combination enhances institutional resilience and supports innovation in policy and practice. Female leadership encourages collaborative problem-solving and context-sensitive strategies that align with local development needs. Despite persistent structural and cultural barriers, the growing involvement of women in leadership positions signals a transformative shift. Strengthening gender-sensitive leadership frameworks remains essential for long-term progress. Embedding adaptive and inclusive leadership models will significantly advance sustainable development outcomes in Cameroon.

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