

Impact of Leadership Styles on Disaster Response in Nigeria

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Abstract

Nigeria faces a complex, multi-hazard environment where the increasing frequency of disasters such as the nationwide floods in 2012 and 2024, building collapses, and disease outbreaks has revealed critical vulnerabilities within the nation's emergency management framework. Although institutional structures like the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) and State Emergency Management Agencies exist, the effectiveness of disaster response remains inconsistent due to varying leadership approaches. This study examines the impact of different leadership styles on disaster response effectiveness in Nigeria, with the goal of identifying practices that enhance coordination and bolster community resilience. Utilising a qualitative research design, the study conducted ten KIIs with experts from NEMA, SEMA and pertinent ministries. The findings suggest that transformational and participatory leadership styles promote essential horizontal coordination, trust-building and rapid resource mobilisation. These approaches proved instrumental in successful interventions, such as the containment of Ebola in Lagos in 2014 and the response to the market fire in Jos in 2018. In contrast, the study emphasizes that rigid, top-down, or transactional leadership often leads to bureaucratic bottlenecks, restricted information flow, and "turf battles" among agencies. Such leadership shortcomings were particularly evident during the 2012 and 2024 floods, where delayed warnings and inadequate inter-agency alignment exacerbated both human and economic suffering. The research concludes that for Nigeria to enhance its disaster governance, a shift away from command-and-control models towards inclusive, adaptive, and collaborative strategies is essential. This transition is vital for building sustainable community trust and ensuring a more efficient and coordinated response to future emergencies.

Keywords: Disaster, Leadership, Leadership Style, Disaster Responses

Introduction

The frequency and severity of disasters, both man-made and natural, have significantly increased in recent decades, resulting in substantial losses globally. Between 1998 and 2017, disasters led to the deaths of 1.3 million people and affected over 4.4 billion others, with economic losses totaling USD 2,908 billion (Aldouraki, 2019). Effective leadership is crucial in disaster response, as seen in events like Hurricane Katrina and the Fukushima disaster, where leadership quality directly impacted outcomes. In Africa, particularly West Africa, disasters are exacerbated by poverty and weak infrastructure, highlighting the need for strong leadership to mobilise resources and foster community cooperation illustrated by the varied responses to the 2014 Ebola outbreak (Shuaib et al., 2014).

Nigeria presents a compelling case for studying the impact of leadership styles on disaster response because of its multi-hazard environment. The prevalence of disasters, including COVID-19, Lassa Fever outbreaks, cholera outbreaks, flooding, and

communal clashes, necessitates prompt and effective responses. However, Olanrewaju & Okorie (2019) noted that leadership style is a crucial factor in eliciting effective responses to these types of disasters. They call for further research into leadership traits and behaviors following disasters and crises, and how communities and businesses can return to a state of normalcy.

Despite having formal structures such as the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) at the federal level and State Emergency Management Agencies (SEMAs) at the sub-national level, disaster response outcomes in Nigeria have remained inconsistent. For example, the 2012 nationwide floods exposed weaknesses in preparedness, coordination, and resource mobilization, leading to high human and economic losses (World Bank, 2013). In contrast, the 2014 Ebola response in Lagos was widely regarded as successful because leaders at both state and federal levels adopted a collaborative and transformational approach, quickly setting up an emergency operations center, empowering technical experts, and communicating effectively with the public (Shuaib et al., 2014).

Conceptual Clarification

This section of the paper clarifies the key concepts and terms used in the study in order to establish a clear understanding of their meanings within the context of the research.

Leadership Styles

Leadership refers to the process of influencing and guiding others towards the achievement of a common goal or vision (Northouse, 2019). Simply put, leadership is the ability to inspire, motivate, and empower individuals or groups to work collaboratively and effectively. Leadership is the process by which individuals influence a group of people to achieve a common goal.

Disaster Response

It is pertinent to conceptualise disaster before looking at disaster response. Disasters have long been conceptualized as sudden and disruptive events that cause widespread damage, human suffering, and social disruption. The concept of disaster has been widely debated in academic and policy circles, with scholars approaching it from multiple disciplinary perspectives. Traditionally, disasters were viewed primarily as natural events resulting from hazards such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, or epidemics.

Disaster Response

Disaster response are actions taken immediately before, during and after a disaster to save lives, reduce suffering, and prevent further damage. It encompasses activities such as emergency relief, evacuation, provision of shelter, health services, and the restoration of basic infrastructure (Perry & Lindell, 2007).

Nexus between Leadership Styles and Disaster Response

The relationship between leadership styles and disaster response has become a critical subject of scholarly discourse, particularly in an era where natural and man-made disasters increasingly test the resilience of societies. Disasters whether natural, such as floods, earthquakes, and pandemics, or human-induced, such as industrial accidents require rapid, effective, and coordinated responses. Leadership plays a pivotal role in

shaping these responses, as it influences decision-making processes, communication, resource allocation, and the morale of responders and affected communities (Kapucu & Van Wart, 2008).

The conceptual link between leadership styles and disaster response lies in how leaders adapt to uncertainty, mobilize collective action, and provide guidance under conditions of crisis. Transformational leadership, for instance, emphasizes vision, inspiration, and motivation, enabling leaders to encourage innovation and adaptability during crises. This style fosters trust and collaboration, which are critical in disaster response environments where interagency cooperation and community engagement are required (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By contrast, transactional leadership, which relies on rules, hierarchy, and rewards, may be effective for enforcing protocols and ensuring compliance with established disaster management procedures (Burns, 1978).

Both styles, when strategically combined, can be complementary in disaster contexts transformational leadership can provide the broader vision and motivation, while transactional leadership ensures operational discipline. According to Hersey and Blanchard (1988), leaders must adjust their style depending on the readiness and competence of followers. In disaster settings, where teams may consist of diverse actors such as emergency responders, volunteers, and local community members, situational flexibility allows leaders to provide directive guidance when necessary and supportive encouragement when autonomy is possible.

This aligns with Boin et al. (2013), who argue that effective crisis leadership requires both sense-making interpreting uncertain and dynamic events and meaning-making communicating a coherent narrative that instills confidence and order amid chaos. Another critical dimension of the nexus is the role of distributed or shared leadership. Disaster response typically involves multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations, international actors, and community groups. No single leader or organization can manage the complexity of disaster response alone; thus, collaborative leadership becomes indispensable (Comfort, 2007).

Collaborative leadership fosters horizontal coordination, trust-building, and shared decision-making, which are vital for pooling resources and avoiding duplication of efforts. For example, during the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, collaborative leadership between governments, the World Health Organization, and civil society organisations was essential in containing the spread of the disease (Moon et al., 2015). The effectiveness of leadership in disaster response also depends on the leader's ability to manage communication. Transparent, timely, and empathetic communication reduces panic, combats misinformation, and fosters trust between authorities and affected populations (Seeger, 2006).

Authoritarian or autocratic leadership styles, characterised by unilateral decision-making, may facilitate rapid action in the immediate aftermath of a disaster but risk alienating stakeholders and undermining trust in the longer term (Kapucu, 2009). Democratic or participatory leadership styles, conversely, encourage input from diverse actors, thereby enhancing legitimacy and acceptance of response strategies, though they may slow decision-making in urgent situations. The nexus between leadership and disaster response is not merely about immediate reaction but also about preparedness and resilience-building. Proactive leaders adopt preventive measures,

develop contingency plans, and invest in capacity-building for communities and institutions (Tierney, 2014).

Such foresight exemplifies transformational leadership in action, as leaders inspire communities to envision a safer and more resilient future. Leaders who fail to prioritise preparedness often leave societies vulnerable, resulting in catastrophic consequences when disasters strike. What works in one cultural or political setting may not necessarily succeed in another. For instance, in societies with strong hierarchical traditions, directive leadership may be more readily accepted and effective, while in more participatory societies, consultative leadership styles may yield better results. This highlights the importance of contextual sensitivity in applying leadership theories to disaster response.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research approach where Interview was used to gather findings regarding leadership effectiveness and disaster response outcomes in Nigeria. This study employs a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into the subject matter by collecting and interpreting non-numerical data. Qualitative approaches are particularly effective in exploring perceptions, experiences, institutional practices, and complex social phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measurements (Mat-Roni et al., 2020). This methodology aligns with an interpretive research framework, which underscores the importance of understanding meanings, perspectives, and contextual realities from the viewpoints of relevant stakeholders.

The primary data for this study were collected exclusively through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The use of KIIs allowed the researcher to gather detailed, expert-based information from individuals with specialised knowledge and practical experience pertinent to the research problem. This approach facilitated a deeper exploration of policy processes, institutional responses, and operational challenges, thereby enhancing the analytical depth and contextual validity of the findings. A total of 10 KIIs were conducted with ten stakeholders to gain a comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics in disaster response in Nigeria. The qualitative data from the KIIs undergo thematic analysis to provide a well-rounded perspective on the impact of leadership styles on disaster management in Nigeria.

Data Analysis

This section of the paper analyses the data collected for the study. It focuses on the systematic examination of information obtained from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) in order to identify patterns, themes, and relevant insights that address the research questions and objectives.

The Influence of Leadership Style on Disaster Response

From the interviews conducted, most of the participants affirmed that the leadership style has a direct influences on disaster management is the community. Security operatives, disaster management officials and community leaders consistently emphasized that effective leadership fosters inter-agency collaboration, ensures timely

resource mobilization, and builds community trust during emergencies. For instance, one local government disaster officer noted that during flood emergencies, “the difference between a coordinated response and a chaotic one is often the leadership style adopted by those in charge.” KIIs also highlighted challenges associated with authoritarian or poorly coordinated leadership approaches, which often undermine efficiency and delay response measures.

According to a senior officer of the Nigerian Red Cross Society in Abuja leadership style determine disaster response. In his word: “From our field experience, leadership style determines the pace of disaster response. When we have leaders who adopt a collaborative approach, the coordination between NGOs, international agencies, and local responders is smooth. However, when leadership is rigid and top-down, information flow is restricted, and this delays response, which can cost lives (KII with a staff of Nigerian Red Cross Society, Abuja, 2025). A director at Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management & Social Development noted that Leadership in disaster response is not only about command but about mobilizing resources and people effectively. Secondary data corroborated these findings.

National Emergency Management Agency and studies by scholars such as Ojo (2018) and Oladipo (2021); stress that leadership style strongly shapes policy implementation, resource allocation, and community engagement in disaster management. Documented evidence shows that transformational and participatory leadership approaches have yielded more effective disaster responses in states such as Lagos and Anambra, particularly in cases of flooding and building collapse. For instance, NEMA’s Annual Report (2022) highlights that during the 2022 nationwide flooding, which affected over 2.4 million people across 33 states, states where disaster management committees applied inclusive and collaborative leadership (such as Anambra and Lagos) recorded faster relief distribution and stronger community mobilization compared to states where leadership was highly centralized and bureaucratic. Similarly, research by Ojo (2018) notes that the 2018 Jos market fire response demonstrated the effectiveness of participatory leadership, as coordination between local leaders, security agencies, and humanitarian actors reduced looting and facilitated rapid rebuilding.

Leadership Style and Inter-Agency Coordination

A staff of National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) stated that: “From our experience at NEMA, the biggest challenge we face in coordinating disaster response is not the absence of resources but the leadership approach guiding inter-agency relations. When leaders adopt a participatory and inclusive style, agencies align easily to a common goal. However, when leadership is rigid and hierarchical, turf battles emerge, slowing down response operations. For example, during the 2022 flood disaster, inclusive leadership helped us harmonize efforts with the Red Cross and Civil Defence to avoid duplication of relief distribution.” Kaduna State Coordinator, State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA):

Noted that at the state level, coordination depends heavily on how leadership sets the tone. Governors and state emergency leaders who are proactive, transparent, and consultative tend to foster stronger collaboration among local government councils, community groups, and federal agencies. In states where leadership is more authoritarian, agencies often work in silos, which undermine the speed and efficiency

of disaster management (KII with KADSEMA, 2025). A staff of Nigerian Red Cross Society notes: “We have observed that coordination during emergencies is highly dependent on leadership behavior. Transformational leaders promote information-sharing, which is vital for humanitarian actors like us.

However, poor leadership leads to duplication of roles, delays in aid delivery, and sometimes competition among agencies. For instance, in cases of building collapse in Lagos, effective leadership ensured a single chain of command that facilitated the timely evacuation of victims (KII with a staff of Nigerian Red Cross Society, 2025). Also, Security Operative of Nigerian Police Force noted that; from the perspective of the Police Disaster Management Unit, leadership style makes or breaks coordination. During emergencies, we need clear communication, shared objectives, and trust among agencies. Leadership that encourages joint task forces and collective decision-making always produces better results.

On the other hand, autocratic leadership often creates bottlenecks because some agencies refuse to share intelligence or operational strategies. Similarly, secondary data corroborates these results. Reports from the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA, 2022) emphasize that leadership gaps have historically led to fragmentation in disaster response coordination. For example, inadequate leadership during the 2012 nationwide floods resulted in duplication of roles between federal and state agencies, leaving some affected communities underserved. Studies by Ojo (2020) and Ibrahim (2021) further argue that participatory leadership improves joint operations among disaster management stakeholders, especially in crises such as flooding, epidemics, and building collapses.

Leadership Style and Decision-Making During Disaster Emergencies

Most of the Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) corroborate this perspective. A senior official of the National Emergency Management Agency (NEMA) stressed that leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the timeliness and quality of response, noting that proactive and consultative leadership reduces delays and enhances the efficiency of interventions. Similarly, the State Coordinator of the State Emergency Management Agency (SEMA) argued that authoritarian leadership often slows decision-making due to restricted information flow, whereas participatory leadership accelerates actions by encouraging collaboration.

A senior officer of the Nigerian Red Cross Society echoed this sentiment, explaining that transformational leaders empower field workers to take timely decisions, which has been particularly effective during flood emergencies. Likewise, a director in the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs highlighted that flexible and inclusive leadership ensures that resources are mobilized without unnecessary bureaucratic delays, thereby improving the speed of disaster response. Secondary data further substantiates these findings. Reports from NEMA (2022) highlight that weak leadership and poor decision-making structures contributed to delayed interventions during the 2022 Kogi flood disaster, exacerbating the impact on affected communities. Adebayo (2021) also notes that during the 2012 nationwide floods, states with proactive governors mobilized resources more quickly and experienced fewer casualties compared to states where rigid leadership hindered timely responses. In the same vein, Ibrahim (2019) found that authoritarian leadership styles often limit inter-

agency collaboration, worsening the outcomes of disasters by slowing critical response processes.

Discussion of Findings

The study revealed that leadership style plays a decisive role in shaping the effectiveness of disaster response in Nigeria. The findings also indicate that leadership style has a strong influence on the level of cooperation among disaster management agencies. When leadership is inclusive and participatory, agencies are more likely to share information, pool resources, and work harmoniously. Conversely, authoritarian or bureaucratic leadership styles tend to create rivalry and fragmented efforts, undermining coordination.

The study further established that leadership strategies centered on openness, fairness, and clear communication play a significant role in building community trust, encouraging participation, and strengthening resilience. Insights from KIIs were consistent with this, as officials from both federal and state disaster agencies emphasized that involving community leaders and stakeholders builds trust and ensures smoother implementation of relief and recovery measures. Secondary sources also affirm this relationship, with NEMA's 2022 reports highlighting that trust and transparency in leadership were crucial to the resilience shown by disaster-prone communities in Bayelsa and Kogi.

Conclusion

Leadership style significantly influences the effectiveness of disaster management systems in Nigeria. Disaster response institutions, essential for national security and community resilience, must seamlessly integrate with civilian populations and local stakeholders. The experiences of communities impacted by recurrent floods, insurgency-related displacements, and health emergencies underscore the pressing need for leadership approaches that promote sustainable, inclusive, and participatory disaster governance.

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