




Regular Article

Servant leadership in crisis management: leadership response in the management of Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Governance
Leadership
Covid-19
Ghana
Servant leadership

ABSTRACT

This paper examined the application of the servant leadership style—broadly defined as a leadership style that focuses on serving others and improving the lives of people, organizations, and communities—by President Akufo Addo in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in Ghana. The study employs a qualitative case study approach using content analysis to (1) analyze how servant leadership principles were applied in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic by President Akufo Addo, and (2) the effectiveness of servant leadership in crisis response and its potential implications for leadership theory and practice. The findings revealed that President Akufo Addo exhibited several key characteristics of the servant leadership approach throughout the period of the pandemic in Ghana. First, President Akufo Addo demonstrated persuasion and effective communication through regular updates to the public, explaining the situation and measures taken. Second, President Akufo Addo engaged various stakeholders to coordinate the pandemic response. Third, the government implemented policies to support citizens' well-being such as electricity subsidies and food distribution programs for vulnerable populations. In addition, early implementation of preventive measures such as school closures and gathering restrictions were rolled out during the pandemic. These findings revealed that President Akufo Addo's approach aligned closely with servant leadership principles that prioritize citizen welfare and the application of preventive and protective measures. These actions resulted in significant initiatives to mitigate pandemic risks, stabilize food security, and cushion the economic impact on basic services. This study fills the gap in current literature in the field of leadership responses by demonstrating the applicability and the effectiveness of the servant leadership style in crisis management within the specific context of the Covid-19 pandemic. It also extends our understanding of how servant leadership can be operationalized in response to complex and systemic challenges such as crisis.

1. Introduction

The world suffered unprecedented calamity precipitated by novel Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) in 2020 after the first case was discovered in Wuhan city in China (Dhama et al., 2020). The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic, as declared by the World Health Organization (WHO), presented several challenges to many economies. This includes both developing and developed economies with a devastating impact on the livelihood of people (Rasul et al., 2021). The Covid-19 pandemic can be seen as a “wicked” problem—a social or cultural issue that is difficult or impossible to solve. This is due to the complexity, uncertainties, and inconsistencies surrounding it. Wicked policy problems also tend to defy clear problem definition (Alford & Head, 2017; Peters & Tarpey, 2019), involve differing interests, have no definitive solutions, and, when

solutions are implemented, they afford no tolerance for error. This results in consequences that linger and are never forgotten (Quiñonez, 2012).

The pandemic may also be seen in terms of an ill-structured problem. According to Dunn (2018), such problems are characterized by conflict among competing goals. It is difficult to determine outcomes as they are subjected to risks that may be estimated probabilistically. Ghana's response to the pandemic requires the role of coordination among multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests and the need to ensure a balance with public health interventions, economic, and socio-cultural factors. Ghana is a developing country with limited resources, which also constrained policy implementation. President Akufo Addo's response to the Covid-19 pandemic has also been marked by innovative public health and socio-economic measures that exemplify servant

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leadership. This makes a compelling case to examine its application in crisis management.

According to the WHO and Worldometer data as of February 2024, Ghana recorded a total confirmed case of 171,834. Given the nature of the Covid-19 pandemic, the demonstration of effective leadership in addressing the accompanied challenges becomes imperative (Lilleker & Stoeckle, 2021). The leadership responses of governments worldwide during this period have gained significant attention from policymakers, academics, researchers, and civil society organizations (Sénit & Biermann, 2021). Studies conducted in the wake of the outbreak of the pandemic (Smiley et al., 2020; Workie et al., 2020), including the WHO and the United Nations, projected an alarming rate of infection and high death rates in developing countries, particularly in Africa. This was attributed to the inadequate and poor nature of infrastructure and healthcare systems available to mitigate the risks (Chisholm et al., 2021; Madhav et al., 2017) associated with pandemic.

Evidence also suggests that actions and inactions of some actors (including the executive, legislature, civil society organizations, departments, and agencies, etc.) during the outbreak of the pandemic led to an escalation in the spread of the virus (Davies and Wenham, 2020). This has claimed lives that could have been avoided if good leadership skills had been demonstrated. That notwithstanding, some governments have also been praised for their good leadership exhibited in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bhalla, 2021). Unlike good leadership, bad leadership is harmful to the survival of societies and organizations, particularly in times of a crisis (Wilson, 2020). Studies have recognized the importance of demonstrating leadership skills and application in such atrocities.

The Covid-19 pandemic presented a challenge for leadership in Ghana. At the local government level, leaders face the task of implementing national directives while addressing community-specific needs. Also in the healthcare sector, a servant leadership style was applied to support frontline workers to ensure that healthcare workers had access to personal protective equipment and emotional support services. This leadership style is particularly necessary to maintain the morale and effectiveness of the healthcare workforce during the period of the pandemic.

However, a search for literature reveals that the application of the servant leadership style in the management of crisis, particularly the Covid-19 pandemic remains largely unexamined. The primary purpose of this paper is to examine the application of the servant leadership style—broadly defined as a leadership style that focuses on serving others and improving the lives of people, organizations, and communities - by President Akufo Addo in addressing the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in Ghana.

1.1. Study objectives

The primary aim of this study is to examine the application and effectiveness of servant leadership in crisis management by focusing on President Akufo Addo's response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana. The specific objectives are.

1. To analyze how servant leadership principles were applied in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic by President Akufo Addo.
2. To evaluate the effectiveness of servant leadership in crisis response and its influence on Ghana's fight against the pandemic.
3. To explore the potential implications of this case of servant leadership theory and practice in crisis management.

Ghana presents a compelling case study for several reasons. As a developing country with limited resources, Ghana faced significant challenges in responding to the pandemic. However, President Akufo Addo's leadership approach, which aligns with servant leadership principles, resulted in innovative public health and socio-economic measures. An investigation of this specific case can provide lessons

into how servant leadership can be effectively applied in resource-constrained environments during crises. Besides, Ghana's experience can also provide lessons for other developing countries and contribute to our broader understanding of servant leadership in practice. The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The second section discusses the review of literature. This is followed by the research methodology, which is discussed in section three (3). The findings and discussion are presented in section four (4) and section five (5), respectively. The conclusion is presented in the last section of the study.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Theory of servant leadership

The servant leadership theory was developed by Robert Greenleaf in 1977 (Heyler & Martin, 2018). The theory focuses on a leadership style where leaders prioritize the needs, aspirations, and interests of their followers (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014). This approach aims to help followers grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Tanno and Banner (2018) emphasized that servant leadership focuses on ethical and caring behavior, involving others in decision-making, and enhancing the growth of workers while improving organizational quality. Besides, servant leadership is conceptually different from other value-based leadership approaches in terms of its overarching motive and objective (Eva et al., 2019). Grisaffe et al. (2016) argued that the motive of servant leadership involves prioritizing individual needs, interests, desires, goals, strengths, and limitations.

The theory places emphasis on the development of followers through creative approaches (Stone & Patterson, 2005). Ehrhart (2004) in addition discussed servant leadership as a leadership style that focuses on personal integrity and the interests of followers. Adamson (2009) summarized servant leadership as primarily concerned with people only. Stone argues that "the extent to which the leader is able to shift the primary focus of his or her leadership from the organization to the follower is the distinguishing factor between the two" (Stone et al., 2004, p. 354), that is, transformational leader and servant leader. According to Muthia and Krishnan (2015), servant leadership is more focused on the psychological needs of followers as a goal in itself, whereas transformational leadership places their needs secondary to the organization's goals.

This difference in focus between servant leadership and transformational leadership is qualitative, with servant leaders having a greater likelihood of putting followers first, organizations second, and their own last (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Studies have analyzed servant leadership with transformational leadership, demonstrating how servant leadership can predict follower outcomes above and beyond transformational leadership (Hoch et al., 2018; Kiker et al., 2019; Parolini et al., 2009; Trong Tuan, 2017). Presented in Fig. 1 are some principles of the servant leadership that has been conceptualized to understand better its application in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana.

In the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, this approach requires governments to prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of citizens, which demonstrates altruistic motivation and stewardship (Knaul et al., 2021). The leader's role is to set the strategic vision for the company, encourage ownership and trust, provide a framework for team flourishing, and build bottom-up empowerment (Totterdill & Exton, 2017). Research also points out that servant leadership is also different from traditional leadership, which sees the leader as the central point of the team (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014; Tanno & Banner, 2018). Instead, servant leaders prioritize the needs of others and invest in serving as a "scaffold" for their employees (Heyler & Martin, 2018).

2.1.1. Criticisms of the servant leadership theory

Notwithstanding the relevance of the servant leadership theory, the

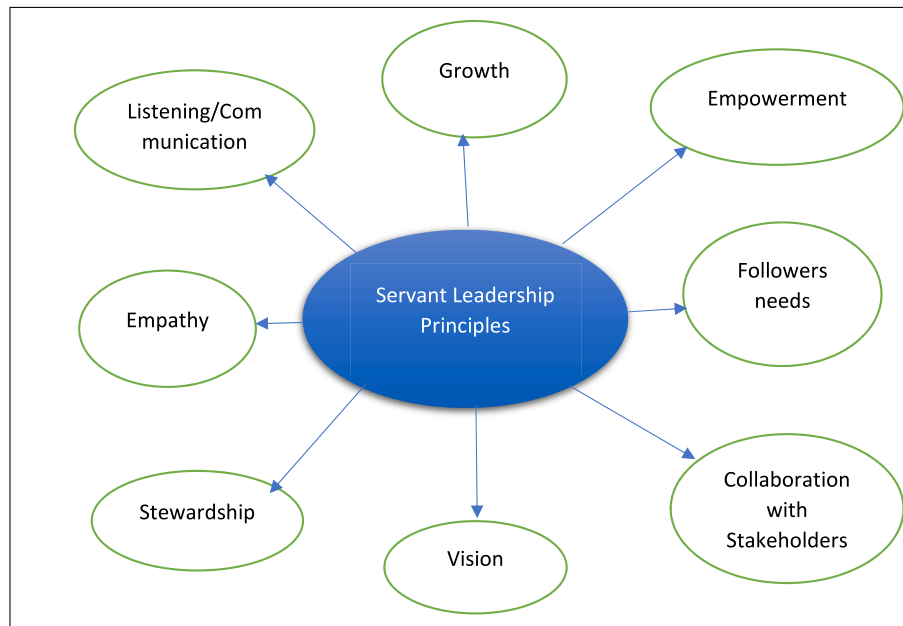


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of servant leadership.

Source: Authors' Construct

theory has faced some criticisms, including its reliance on patriarchal approaches, disregarding the history of subjugation (Heyler & Martin, 2018), and its reliance on individual moral frameworks rather than agreed-upon standards (Rachmawati & Lantu, 2014). It is also argued that the process of implementing servant leadership takes time, energy, and skill (Tanno & Banner, 2018). It takes time to translate a vision into clear objectives and priorities and communicate it clearly to the team. Despite these criticisms, servant leadership theory can be an admirable leadership model that leaders can emulate in their organizations by emphasizing employee growth, open communication, and community (Tanno & Banner, 2018). Servant leadership can lead to increased motivation, creativity, and commitment from followers.

To examine the usefulness of servant leaders in a challenging moment like the Covid-19 pandemic, it is imperative that particular attention is given to the qualities of the individual in the management of the pandemic on one hand, the relationship of the leader with key stakeholders in the management of the pandemic, and the situational issues surrounding it. It is with this understanding that this study is guided by the servant leadership theory to explore the various servant leadership roles played by President Akufo Addo in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic. This is because these qualities are essential tools expected of a good leader, not just in crisis management but in leadership.

2.2. The concept of leadership

Leadership is a critical concept in public administration that includes various styles and ethical considerations that significantly influence organizational dynamics and effectiveness (Zaim et al., 2021). At its core, leadership involves guiding and influencing others to achieve a collective goal (Imam & Zaheer, 2021). Leadership styles, on the other hand, are those approaches that leaders adopt to influence and motivate their teams (Zaim et al., 2021). Some conventional leadership styles according to the literature are transactional leadership which focuses on clear structures and rewards for performance (Piwovar-Sulej & Iqbal, 2023), transformational leadership, which inspires and motivates followers to achieve a shared vision (Kleefstra, 2019), autocratic leadership, which centralized decision-making (Torlak et al., 2022), democratic leadership, which encourages participation and

collaboration among team members, servant leadership, which prioritizes the needs of followers with the aim to ensure well-being (Miao et al., 2021), and laissez-faire leadership, which offers minimal supervision and allows teams to self-manage (Zaim et al., 2021).

Effective leadership thus includes various styles and skills that enable leaders to motivate and direct their teams towards success. It is, however, cautious to add that no single style is deemed universally effective, and the success of each style or combination of styles will depend on the specific context. Effective leadership in contemporary public administration has received a lot of systematic investigation in recent years. Drawing insights from the principal-agent perspective on public sector management and public administration (Bjurstrom, 2020; Braun & Guston, 2003), leaders are entrusted with the responsibility to manage the affairs and resources of the state diligently to maximize the net gain and well-being of the people (Allen & Monica, 2010). This responsibility entails broad spheres in public administration, including the management of health-related issues like a pandemic. The role of an executive leader in public administration is very critical. As such, issues regarding why some leaders succeed and others do not have become paramount in recent years. This is what Lambright and Quinn (2011) described as a 'mystery'.

2.3. Policy problem characterization

Over the last decades, a growing body of policy literature has extensively examined the dynamics of problem characterization in politics and policy processes (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Chong and Druckman, 2007b; Cobb & Elder, 1983). Scholars see policy problems as the recognition that arises from social norms that establish the criteria for when a condition is considered a problem (Anderson, 1979; Majone, 1989, pp. 23–24). Issue image is the overall and fundamental impression of whether an issue involves potential stakes of causing harm or providing assistance (Baumgartner & Jones, 2009; Jones, 1994). The issue image has also proven to powerfully influence the thinking and directions about how the issue ought to be addressed and how much policy effects should be made (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Jones & Baumgartner, 2005). On this understanding, addressing the challenges of Covid-19 calls for a purposive course of action that embraces the support of actors to address the problem (Anderson, 2016).

The way leaders frame and characterize the Covid-19 crisis significantly influences public perception and policy response. In the case of Ghana, President Akufo Addo portrays the pandemic as a serious threat that requires collective action, which shapes the strategy adopted. This framing exemplifies the concept of an issue image. Besides, the government's approach to Covid-19 as a complex policy problem led to a multi-faceted response. These actions demonstrate how the issue image influenced the direction and intensity of policy efforts because leadership during a crisis involves not only the implementation of policies but also shaping public understanding of the pandemic.

2.4. Leadership in crisis management

The world is witnessing an increased interest in the concept of leadership in public administration in recent years, particularly during a crisis management (Lambright & Quinn, 2011; Ospina, 2017). This is acknowledging the need for various actors to critically examine the role leaders play in public office and how their actions and inactions affect the well-being of the people. This also demonstrates a need for good leadership to save lives and to protect livelihoods. It is during a period like this that true leadership matters to demonstrate a country's ability to manage the pandemic, the economy, and the livelihood of the people.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been characterized as a low-chance, high-impact crisis for a long-shadow crisis (Boin & Hart, 2010; Lloyd-Smith, 2020), which calls for a unique leadership style and skills to combat it. 'Wicked' problems like pandemics are difficult to tame, as they create uncertainty, urgency and have an exceptional magnitude and prolonged impact (Boin & Hart 2003; Nohrstedt et al., 2018; Steen & Morsut, 2020). It could be argued that the pandemic has impacted the way organizations and their leaders manage crises of such magnitude, as they had to continuously "prepare for and respond to unscheduled, undesirable, urgent, and threatening contingencies" (Boin & Hart, 2010, p. 357). Scholars of crisis management point out that crisis management has three main goals: to save lives, protect critical infrastructure, and restore trust in public institutions (Boin et al., 2013). The leadership style that appears to be most suitable to manage the Covid-19 pandemic is the servant-leadership theory.

In Greenleaf's (1977) work, servant leadership serves "multiple stakeholders, including their communities and society as a whole" (Graham, 1991, p. 112). Servant leadership can "build trust with employees, customers, and communities" (Liden et al., 2008, p. 162) and provide a solid basis to rally the political actors around to manage the crisis. As a viable leadership theory that helps organizations and improves the well-being of followers, the leader-follower relationship is the central theme in servant leadership (Liden, Wayne, Liao, & Meuser, 2008). As a framework to explore leadership in crisis management, this study will explore the application of servant leadership theory to crisis management. This framework will examine how the principles of servant leadership (e.g., stewardship, empathy, and stakeholder engagement) have been applied effectively to address the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Scholars have also analyzed leadership in crisis management on different dimensions, particularly at organizational levels, war-related bases, financial or economic crises, and many others (Chisholm et al., 2021; Eichenauer et al., 2022). One of such leadership approaches is servant leadership, which emphasizes the leader's responsibility to come to the aid of his followers in times of crisis. By extension, the Covid-19 novel pandemic also poses challenging moments for livelihood and requires the application of the servant leadership style to abate the severity of the impact (Flood et al., 2020, p. 628).

While servant leadership theory is widely studied and applied, there is limited research on how contextual factors like national culture influence the effectiveness of servant leadership globally (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; van Dierendonck et al., 2017). A significant gap exists in developing consistent and valid measurement tools for servant leadership (Zhang et al., 2021). Different researchers use varying scales and

definitions that make it challenging to compare results or replicate across different settings. Similarly, the precise mechanisms through which servant leadership influences policy outcomes are not fully understood (Eva et al., 2019), which requires more studies. While there have been some studies on leadership during the covid-19 pandemic (Nicola et al., 2020; Chen & Sriphon, 2021), there is a gap in literature regarding the role of servant leadership in the management of the pandemic. Additionally, servant leadership in crisis management appears to be a relatively new concept in Ghana that has not received significant scientific investigation over the decades. As a result, this study sought to fill these gaps in literature.

2.5. A servant leadership style

Servant leadership style in its broad sense is a leadership style which prioritizes the needs of followers with the aim to ensure well-being. There is, however, an ongoing debate in the literature about the exact definition and dimensions of the servant leadership style. Some argue that it overlaps significantly with other leadership styles (Anderson & Sun, 2017; Bavik, 2020), which questions its distinctiveness. Also, the idea of the leader as a "servant" raises questions about power dynamics and authority. Some argue this could undermine leadership effectiveness in certain contexts (Collinson & Tourish, 2015; Neubert et al., 2022). Characteristics of the servant leadership style include listening, empathy, persuasion, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Heyler & Martin, 2018; Parris & Peachey, 2013).

The concept of servant leadership style emphasizes the importance of serving others and reorienting one's focus toward others within an organization or a larger community (Eva et al., 2019; Trong Tuan, 2017). This definition differs from other perspectives on leadership as it does not stem from within the leader but outside (Du Plessis & Nkambule, 2020). It is also conceptualized as a behavior or attitude of leaders who give more importance to the needs of others or their organization than to their own desires (Woodruff, 2004). According to Trong and Tuan (2017), the motive of the servant leadership style is the leader's personal motivation for taking up leadership responsibility, which is rooted in their self-concept as an altruistic moral person. While servant leadership is often presented as universally applicable, some studies suggest its effectiveness may vary across cultures, particularly in high power distance societies (Miao et al., 2021; Neubert et al., 2022).

3. Methodology

Analysis of this study relates to a period of two years (March 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic was first discovered in Ghana, to December 2021), during which the severity of the pandemic was most felt, and the crisis was at its peak. A qualitative case study approach (Alam, 2021) was employed to analyze the actions and inactions of President Akufo Addo by relying on data from different media and government reports to avoid any form of bias that has the tendency to jeopardize findings. A single-case study design focusing on President Akufo Addo was chosen to offer an in-depth analysis of leadership during the Covid-19 crisis in Ghana. This approach allows for critical analysis of decision-making actions in a specific context.

President Akufo Addo was selected as the subject due to his critical role as head of state during the period of the pandemic in Ghana from March 2020 to December 2021. As emphasized in literature, the use of qualitative case studies has been long established in governance literature to present detailed analysis of the contextual dynamics of a concept (Runfola et al., 2017; Gammelgaard, 2017). The obvious advantage of using a case study approach is that it is useful for investigating how theory and practice interact in specific contexts to generate new or unexpected findings or to test or refine existing theories (Barab & Squire, 2016).

Actions were selected based on their direct relevance to Covid-19

management, including public health measures, economic interventions, and communication strategies. A table documenting these actions and their sources is presented in the findings section of this study. The secondary data sources for the study include the various public speeches of President Akufo Addo since the outbreak of the pandemic, Covid-19 data on active cases and deaths recorded, and other scholarly literature relating to the crisis and Covid-19 management. Such knowledge is ideal to inform readers about the significance of effective leadership practices and their influence on crisis management. Given this approach, key sources were purposively selected from top-level, credible, reputable, trustworthy, and relevant media outlets in Ghana and beyond. The authors also verified these media reports from the official websites and documents of the government sources.

The processes and step-by-step guide focus on data collection from media reports, official documents, and scholarly literature (Zhao et al., 2021). Media sources were purposively selected based on their relevance to President Akufo Addo's actions during the pandemic. Only reputable, trustworthy outlets with a long-standing history of reliable reporting in Ghana and international organizations covering African affairs were included. Sources were evaluated based on their editorial policies, transparency in reporting, and consistency with other verified information. Furthermore, reports from media outlets were cross-checked against official government documents and websites to ensure accuracy. In addition, peer-reviewed scholarly articles were prioritized for their rigor and reliability.

Content analysis was employed to identify themes from the various actions of government and their implications on the management of the pandemic (Gehman et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2018). The content analysis was conducted manually by the two independent authors to ensure reliability. The authors identified recurring themes and patterns related to crisis management and leadership approaches. Both authors independently read through all collected materials multiple times to gain an understanding of the content. Each author developed an initial set of codes related to leadership actions, public health measures, economic interventions, and communication strategies. In addition, the codes were based on the objective of the study and servant leadership theory. These codes were compared and discussed to address discrepancies. Related themes were then grouped into broader themes. For example, codes related to "public health measures" and "economic support". The coded data was then analyzed to interpret the themes in relation to servant leadership principles and crisis management strategies.

Disagreements were resolved through discussion to reach consensus. The themes and patterns were interpreted to understand the actions and decisions of President Akufo Addo during the pandemic. These themes were analyzed based on the key objectives of the study and interpreted in light of the servant leadership theory. Content analysis offers opportunities to analyze content, which will result in relevant themes (Lindgren et al., 2020). In other words, content analysis is a research technique that uses systematic analysis and pattern recognition to uncover themes or patterns to facilitate the interpretation of text data (Malterud, 2012).

3.1. Inclusion criteria

The selection process followed a clear, systematic inclusion criterion. Sources were selected based on their direct relevance to President Akufo Addo's actions and decisions related to Covid-19 management in Ghana between March 2020 and December 2021. Only reputable, trustworthy media outlets, official government websites, and peer-reviewed scholarly publications were considered. Sources that provided detailed accounts of specific actions, policies, or statements were prioritized. Sources with a long-standing history of reliable reporting in Ghana, media outlets with clear editorial policies, official government websites and communication channels, and reputable international media organizations with coverage of African affairs were given priority to ensure transparency in the selection of the secondary sources.

Also, reports and documents published during or shortly after the events they described were preferred to ensure accuracy. A range of sources were also included to capture different perspectives, such as national and international media, government communications, and academic analyses. Information from media reports was cross-checked against official government documents and websites for accuracy. In addition, only publicly available documents and reports published in the English language were included in that dataset to ensure consistent interpretation by the authors. In the end, the final selection of the data sources was reviewed by both authors to ensure adherence to these criteria.

3.2. Study limitations

Notwithstanding the credibility and validity of the data sources and analytical tools, it is important to note some potential limitations or constraints of this study. For instance, the study relied largely on secondary data, which may be susceptible to some level of bias. There may be issues of potential bias in media reporting. Media reports may reflect editorial bias or selective reporting which may influence the interpretation of President Akufo Addo's actions. Another is official government reports that may not capture the full context of crisis management due to political considerations or omissions, which may limit our complete understanding of the complete picture. Another is that it is also difficult to ascertain the total speeches or reports used for this study because not all these reports were written. Some were video presentations. Also, the happenings of Covid-19 at the time made it difficult to fully provide written documents for all these speeches and government actions. This is based on subjective judgement rather than statistical representation and limits generalizability. The study also focuses on a single case (Ghana), which restricts comparisons with other contexts or countries. Although these findings may not be generalizable, they may be transferable to other contexts with similar or comparable characteristics. To add to this, the qualitative study is not statistically representative based on the small sample size that limits the discussion of this study to only the servant leadership practices of President Akufo Addo in Ghana.

That said, the findings of this study are limited in its ability to generalize to other populations or contexts. It is also important to note the possibility that President Akufo Addo's perceptions and documented actions do not reflect the full reality of crisis management, and there is the need to recognize that this study focuses on a single case study (Ghana), which limits the ability to make comparisons with other contexts or countries. This study therefore acknowledges these limitations and recommends that future studies consider incorporating larger contexts and multiple approaches to examine this important phenomenon.

4. Findings

The authors examined the actions of President Akufo Addo since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors employed a case study approach by exploring through the lens of a servant leadership style from a developing country's perspective (Ghana) on crisis management. First, the analysis summarized the various public comments made and initiatives introduced by President Akufo Addo during the crisis management. This is followed by an analysis of his relationship with key stakeholders in responding to the crisis. The summary of key findings on policy initiatives and actions taken by President Akufo is the management of the Covid-19 pandemic is presented in Table 1.

This study extends the application of servant leadership theory to crisis management in a developing country context during a global pandemic. It provides lessons on how servant leadership principles manifest in an African political leadership context by expanding the theory's cross-cultural applicability. It further offers concrete examples of how servant leadership principles can be operationalized in government policy and communication strategies during a crisis. Finally, the findings show how multiple aspects of servant leadership (e.g., empathy,

Table 1
Summary of key findings.

KEY FINDINGS	SOURCES
Key actions taken by President Akufo Addo in the management of Covid-19 Crisis in Ghana	
Key Findings	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Demonstration of servant leadership style through weekly update through speeches to the public on actions by government. ✓ Regular holding of Inter-Ministerial Committee meetings with relevant stakeholders. ✓ Significant preventive measures such as the suspension of public gatherings and closure of schools were implemented. ✓ Constant assurance to followers in alignment with the servant leadership theory, as it encourages followers to take caution and overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. ✓ The government fully covered the electricity bills of low-income consumers and lifeline consumers. For residential and commercial consumers, 50 % of their bills were absorbed for a period of six (6) months. ✓ The government initiated free food distribution and relief policies for marginalized groups, and distributed food items to needy people in areas under movement restrictions. ✓ Cushioning the cost of basic services during the pandemic and ensuring a relatively stable food security system. 	Ministry of Health (2020); Office of the President, (2020); Ministry of Finance (2020); World Health Organizations (2022); World Bank Report (2020); United Nations Report (2021)
II. Relationship Management with other Key Stakeholders	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Akufo Addo demonstrated strong collaboration with key stakeholders, including the Ministry of Health, Finance, and Information and Communication, to manage the crisis effectively. ✓ This led to initiatives like the construction of the Ghana Infectious Disease Centre, funded by private contributions. ✓ Encouraging the media to join the fight against the pandemic. ✓ Engagement with the domestic pharmaceutical industry to produce logistics for combating and preventing the virus. ✓ Leading a nationwide public education campaign on preventive measures to control the spread of infections. 	

Source: Authors, 2024

foresight, stewardship) can be integrated into crisis response to provide a more holistic view of the theory in practice. This linkage with policy outcomes and public responses contributes to our understanding of the effectiveness of this leadership style in crisis as presented in the findings below.

4.1. Persuasion in crisis management

Findings indicate that Ghana recorded its first case on March 12, 2020, and its first Covid-19-related death on March 24, 2020 (Ministry of Health, 2020). During this period of the pandemic, President Akufo Addo has been seen to have demonstrated that, indeed, the nature of the pandemic has the potential to pose a devastating impact on the livelihood of the people and the economy in general. It is with this eagerness that even when Ghana did not record any case of the virus, President Akufo Addo gave his first public speech on March 11, 2020, on the

pandemic (Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020) to inform the general public about the nature of the virus and the need for the country's preparedness in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. In one of his early addresses to the nation, he made a very important comment that is worthy of praise from a servant leader in crisis management. He said,

We know what to do to bring the economy back to life, but what we do not know is how to bring people back to life (Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020).

This statement by President Akufo Addo received a lot of praise-worthy recognitions globally as a leader who puts priority on the lives of his followers (Mwainyekule & Frimpong, 2020). One of the principles of a servant leader is a demonstration of effective communication skills. As a way of addressing the covid-19 pandemic through effective communication, President Akuffo Addo introduced a weekly update and was consistent with his weekly update to his followers on the actions his government is taking to manage the situation.

4.2. Collaborative leadership

Another pillar of the servant leadership style is the demonstration of collaborative governance. This was demonstrated by President Akufo Addo through his collaboration with many others in the management of the pandemic. In terms of relationships with various stakeholders, findings revealed that barely a week after Ghana recorded its first two cases of the virus (Afriyie et al., 2020), President Akufo Addo called an inter-ministerial committee meeting, which he chaired, and some key stakeholders, including ministers of state and interest groups, were in attendance to discuss the way forward to mitigate the risk of the pandemic (Office of the President, 2020).

Some significant preventive and protective initiatives were announced, and notable among them was the suspension of all public gatherings, including the closure of all public and private schools at all levels (Afriyie et al., 2020; Odoom et al., 2021). At the time these restrictive decisions were taken, the country recorded only six (6) cases of the virus. This is seen as a proactive move taken by President Akufo Addo compared to most of his peers on the continent and even in some advanced countries. President Akufo Addo gave reassurance and hope to his followers by noting that

Fellow Ghanaians, these are not ordinary times, so let us all put our shoulders to the wheel, and I am confident that, together, by the grace of God, we shall overcome this challenge (President's Speech, 2020).

In terms of collaborative leadership, findings suggest that President Akufo Addo also demonstrated strong collaboration with other key stakeholders in the management of the crisis (Aduhene & Osei-Assibey, 2021). Heads of key institutions like the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Information and Communication, and many other key institutions, including the private sector, were engaged (Wallace et al., 2022). These collaborations resulted in several initiatives, including the building of the Ghana Infectious Disease Centre (the first to be constructed in Ghana). This was funded by private contributions from individuals and organizations (Afriyie et al., 2020). President Akufo Addo exhibited servant leadership in most of his public speeches. Notable among such statements is where he mentioned that:

This fight, fellow Ghanaians, cannot be that of the government alone. It is for all of us. I urge the media to join this cause fully and help effectively disseminate information on the dos and don'ts of the disease. The information to be put out, however, must be that approved by health authorities. We have begun to engage with the domestic pharmaceutical industry to assist in producing as much of the logistics required to combat and prevent the virus as much as is possible under the circumstances (Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020).

He also added that,

The Ministry of Information is leading a nationwide public education campaign on preventive measures that we must all observe to ensure that we are able to control the spread of the infections should we record any infections in the country, which *Mercifully so far we have not, but by the law of averages, we shall* (Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020).

The policy impact of these collaborations is that they led to rapid policy implementation during the pandemic. It also resulted in tangible outcomes such as the construction of the Ghana Infectious Disease Centre. It is also seen in improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of policy implementation across various sectors. Besides, the collaboration with the media and the Ministry of Information led to a nationwide public education campaign.

4.3. Provision of basic necessities

Another significant principle of a servant leader is the provision of basic necessities to his followers in times of crisis. Again, findings suggest that President Akufo Addo, in April 2020, during one of his updates on the pandemic, announced that the government would fully cover the bills of low-income consumers of electricity in the country for the months of April, May, and June 2020 (Ministry of Finance, 2020). A promise he delivered and even extended for an additional three (3) months to September 2020. The president noted that this relief package was aimed at providing relief for the vulnerable citizens during the pandemic. Lifeline consumers had their bills fully covered. Other categories of consumers also received a 50 percent subsidy (Ministry of Finance, 2023). For residential and commercial consumers, 50 percent of their bills were absorbed by the government during this period. The president made this known when he said,

We have decided on further measures of mitigation for Ghanaians for the next three months ... The government will fully absorb electricity bills for the poorest of the poor, i.e., lifeline consumers. Other categories of consumers will enjoy a 50 percent discount within the same period. For all other consumers, residential and commercial, the government will absorb 50 percent of your electricity bill for this period using your March 2020 bill as the benchmark (President of Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020).

This measure or intervention directly addressed the economic hardship faced by Ghanaians during the pandemic. Full payment of bills for low-income consumers and provision of a 50 % subsidy for others by the government ensured that citizens could maintain access to electricity without financial strain.

The impact of the pandemic on food security in urban areas in Ghana has been exacerbated by the pre-existing challenges of food security (President of Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020). The government, through the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Sanitation, Works, and Housing, in collaboration with faith-based organizations, distributed food items to the needy people in areas under the restriction of movement due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Ministry of Finance, 2020). These included food items such as bags of rice, tomato paste, cooking oil, sardines, eggs, beans, and others (Ministry of Finance Office of the President of the Republic of Ghana, 2020). These initiatives were targeted to provide comfort to those affected by the closure of businesses and trade activities. The then Minister of Finance, Hon. Ken Ofori Atta, explained that

While this intervention will not immediately solve all the problems within these communities, it's an effort that supplements the church's efforts to reach out to as many of our mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters whose inability to go to work has led to hunger at home (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

The provision of food items to needy people in restricted areas was significant in dealing with the immediate security issues. This measure

helped prevent hunger and malnutrition among vulnerable populations. Additionally, the then Minister of Gender, Children and Social Protection also distributed some food packs to needy households in Kumasi and some parts of Accra. Accommodation was also provided for the homeless and deprived individuals (Ministry of Finance, 2020). The president also worked closely with the Ministry of Finance to make funds available to manage the situation, and some of such instances were when he noted that:

In order to do so, at my prompting, the Minister for Finance has made funds available to enhance our coronavirus preparedness and response plan. That is to fund the expansion of infrastructure, purchase of materials and equipment, and public education (President Akufo Addo, March 11, 2020).

The provision of shelter for homeless and deprived individuals is a demonstration of the government's commitment to protecting the most vulnerable members of society during a crisis. The allocation of GHS 1.2 billion (USD \$209 million) for various relief measures was significant in its approach to crisis management. To that extent, these measures serve a servant leadership approach that prioritizes the needs of the citizens.

5. Discussion

It should be reckoned that the pandemic brought devastating implications on people's physical health, employment, and income (OECD, 2020) as well as the mental well-being of individuals. Overall, the findings suggest that Ghana has been badly affected by the pandemic and expects the exhibition of a good leadership approach to manage the situation with all seriousness, which the proponents of the servant leadership theory seek to suggest (Brown, 2013; Claude and Graef, 1993). It is said that no leader in the world could with certainty determine the extent of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The expectation is that critical attention would be given considering the exigency where countries are trying to put in some precautionary measures needed to slow the spread of the pandemic (Khanna et al., 2020). It can therefore be assumed that servant leadership was imperative.

Theoretical analysis of literature showed that one cannot examine the leadership role or leadership style of a leader without considering largely the personality traits of the leader (Nawaz & Khan, 2016), the nature of the relationship management skills with key stakeholders, the environment, and the situation in each period (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). However, it is also important that the concept of rationality in the policy decision-making process of public officeholders is considered irrespective of the type of leadership skills they possess.

5.1. Empathy and compassion

The emphasis here considers the traits of a servant leader as one that his subjects look up to, particularly in times of crisis for hope (Day et al., 2014). The findings show that Akufo Addo's leadership response is characterized by having demonstrated a servant leader who is working to salvage the detrimental implications of the pandemic. President Akufo Addo's decision to cover electricity bills for low-income consumers and provide a 50 % subsidy for others demonstrates the servant leadership principle of empathy and compassion for his followers. This action is consistent with the theory's emphasis on leaders serving their constituents rather than focusing on personal gain. The distribution of food items to needy people in restricted areas also shows empathy, a core tenet of servant leadership. President Akufo Addo also demonstrated the compassionate aspect of servant leadership.

5.2. Persuasion and communication

As argued by the servant theorists, persuasion is part of being a successful leader, and servant leaders can use it to convince others that their thinking is the right path. In essence, Akufo Addo made persuasive

comments to make his followers appreciate the devastating impact of the crisis and how it is important that they approach it collectively and all-inclusively. In clear terms, the findings suggest a demonstration of a servant leader who knows the time and season it is, as may be argued by the servant leadership theory, and admonishes his followers to take caution of the devastating impact of the pandemic. Analyzing from a leadership perspective, one can observe that the findings of this study on the servant leadership style exhibited by President Akufo Addo in the management of the pandemic are consistent with the findings of Antwi (2022).

5.3. Prioritization of followers needs and foresight

The servant leadership theory is a leadership style where leaders prioritize the needs, aspirations, and interests of their followers. This approach aims to help followers grow healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely to become servants and emphasizes caring behavior, involving others in decision-making, enhancing worker growth, and improving organizational quality (Dutta & Khatri, 2017). In the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, servant leaders prioritize the health, safety, and well-being of citizens, setting strategic vision, encouraging ownership and trust, and providing a framework for team flourishing. This was seen in most of the actions of President Akufo Addo regarding the management of the pandemic.

Another clear demonstration of the servant leadership role by President Akufo Addo in the management of the pandemic is the provision of basic needs for the people. It was stated that servant leadership is a leadership approach that prioritizes the needs and interests of followers and redirects personal goals towards the benefits of the community (Tanno & Banner, 2018). During the period of the pandemic, servant leadership has been shown to be an effective leadership practice to address unexpected challenges. As argued, servant leaders care about their followers' well-being and prioritize their personal growth and happiness to make life easier to deal with the anxiety associated with the pandemic (Parris & Peachey, 2013). The government also initiated the 'free food' distribution and relief policy for the marginalized group as a way of showing care and concern for their needs.

President Akufo Addo also demonstrated foresight through proactive measures such as the allocation of funds for infrastructure expansion and public education even before Ghana recorded its first case. This anticipatory action shows the leader's ability to foresee and prepare for future challenges, which also aligns with the servant leadership theory.

5.4. Stewardship and collaboration

Similar to compassion, President Akufo also demonstrated stewardship. The president's collaboration with various ministries and faith-based organizations to distribute resources demonstrates the stewardship principle of servant leadership. The Covid-19 pandemic can be described as a crisis. The word 'crisis' has been used interchangeably with a few other terms, including 'disaster', business interruption, catastrophe, and emergency (Herbane, 2010). Large-scale crises and disasters like the Covid-19 pandemic are often so complex that the management and response consist of multiple organizations and can involve multiple levels (Boin & Bynander, 2015; Bynander & Nohrstedt, 2020; Nohrstedt et al., 2018). Effectively managing a crisis calls for a collaborative response and putting in place collaborative systems. Collaborative crisis management in most cases is organized according to what has been called the 'principle of disaster subsidiarity' (Boin et al., 2017).

Research suggests that during a crisis, collaborative governance is required (Grint, 2005; Rameshan, 2022) to mitigate such risk. Significantly, these calls for collaborative governance among the various actors in the policy-making processes by President Akufo-Addo reveal the importance of relationship management during a crisis management. Relationship management during a crisis is very critical for the survival

and well-being of the people and cannot be undermined (Tanno & Banner, 2018). A good leader should be able to bring his people together in situations like the pandemic to share common ideas and mitigate the impact.

One cannot dispute the fact that during crisis management like the covid-19 pandemic, both personal leadership styles and collective leadership (Spyridonidis et al., 2022) are necessary. Any form of disregard for these two approaches will be a catastrophic experience for political leaders during a crisis (Boin et al., 2016). For instance, people look up to the commitment of leaders on a personal level during a crisis and subsequently expect a collaborative approach to inculcate expert ideas to address problem. A recent study by Rameshan (2022) alluded that the inherent traits of a leader influence their leadership qualities, especially during a crisis.

Servant leaders see themselves as stewards of organizations who use their leadership positions to respond to the emerging needs of their followers. The analysis of this paper revealed that the actions of President Akufo Addo in the management of the Covid-19 pandemic largely testify to a leader whose conduct is worth emulating in times of imminent danger. This finding supports the research findings of Dickson (2023) and Kapucu and Moynihan (2021). It is therefore not surprising that President Akufo Addo's leadership response has been largely acclaimed to have demonstrated a good leader who works consistently to extricate his subjects from an obvious wicked pandemic (Afriyie et al., 2020).

These collaborated efforts and actions by the government and the faith-based organizations demonstrated a servant leader who cares about the well-being and welfare needs of his followers. The implementation of these initiatives by the government cushioned the cost of basic services during the pandemic. It also ensured a relatively stable food security system during the period.

5.4.1. Justification and strengths of the study

The study's choice of a single-case design with a focus on President Akufo Addo as the primary unit of analysis is justified for the following reasons. First, as the Head of State, President Akufo Addo played a central and decisive role in Ghana's response. Second, this single case design allows for critical examination of leadership decisions and actions within a specific context, and President Akufo Addo's leadership style during this period provides a unique opportunity to study the application of servant leadership principles in crisis situations. In addition, to trace the direct impact on leadership decisions and policy implementation outcomes. This single case study method offers the advantage of deep and holistic exploration of President Akufo Addo's leadership within the real-life context of Ghana's response to Covid-19. This approach is ideal for exploring the "how" and "why" of leadership decisions and their impacts during the pandemic. It captures the complexities that broader methods might miss. This approach also supports the application of servant leadership theory in crisis contexts to provide relevant insights for theory and practice. Besides, since crisis leadership during a pandemic is a unique context-dependent phenomenon, the single case study approach is well-suited to understanding how leadership style influences outcomes in a specific national setting.

The strengths of this study lie in its application of servant leadership theory in crisis situations, and its novelty includes the focus on developing a country's response to a global pandemic, indicating the understanding of servant leadership beyond traditional businesses or Western contexts and its interdisciplinary nature that includes leadership studies, public health, and policy analysis. This study is among the first to examine servant leadership in the context of a developing country's response to the pandemic by extending the application of this theory beyond traditional business and Western settings. The study also contributes to both leadership theory and practical crisis management, which is timely for current literature on crisis management. Findings offer practical recommendations for policymakers and leaders in similar contexts. This shows how servant leadership principles can inform

effective crisis management. It provides an interdisciplinary contribution that bridges leadership studies in public health and policy analysis to offer a multidimensional perspective on crisis response.

5.5. Potential biases in analysis and discussions

It is important to acknowledge that these analyses and discussions of findings may face some potential biases, and it is important to acknowledge the same. Given that this study relied on public speeches and government reports, there are chances that these sources may present an overly positive view of the government's actions and may not fully capture the implementation challenges or public dissatisfaction. It is also important to note that while this study focuses on President Akufo Addo's leadership, it is important to consider alternative explanations for the pandemic outcomes in Ghana, such as the existing health infrastructure, public compliance with health measures, and the role that other demographic characteristics might have played in the outcomes. And finally, while this study demonstrates the effectiveness of servant leadership principles in Ghana's Covid-19 response, its applicability in other contexts requires further investigation. For example, the principles of empathy, foresight, and stewardship may be critical in various types of crises, but their implementation may differ based on other contextual, political, and economic factors. Future studies may consider exploring these factors in detail to ascertain their impact on the leadership outcomes.

6. Conclusion

The study explored the role of servant leadership in managing the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana using President Akufo Addo's actions as a case study. The analysis demonstrated how servant leadership principles were applied to address the challenges posed by the pandemic from March 2020 to December 2021. A qualitative case study approach was used to examine the interaction between theory and practice in specific contexts. Secondary data such as public speeches, Covid-19 data, and scholarly literature were used. Key sources were selected from credible, reputable, trustworthy, and relevant media outlets in Ghana. Content analysis was used to identify themes and patterns in President Akufo Addo's comments and speeches, interpreting them in light of servant leadership theory.

The findings revealed that President Akufo Addo exhibited several key characteristics of the servant leadership approach throughout the period of the pandemic in Ghana. First, President Akufo Addo demonstrated persuasion and effective communication through regular updates to the public, explaining the situation and measures taken. Second, the findings also revealed that President Akufo engaged various stakeholders to coordinate the pandemic response. This collaborative approach led to initiatives such as the Infectious Disease Center. Third, the findings also revealed that the government implemented policies to support citizens' well-being, such as electricity subsidies and food distribution programs for vulnerable populations. In addition, findings revealed that early implementation of preventive measures such as school closures and gathering restrictions were rolled out during the pandemic.

It is important to note that these findings align with servant leadership theory that emphasizes putting followers' needs first. The study shows how these principles can be applied effectively in crisis management, particularly during a public health emergency. This study demonstrates that servant leadership can be an effective framework for managing complex situations. As such, leaders facing similar crises might benefit from adopting servant leadership principles. Besides, the success of the multi-stakeholder approach reveals the importance of collaborative efforts in crisis management. This implies that leaders should prioritize building and maintaining stronger partnerships across sectors. It is clear that the evolving nature of the pandemic requires flexible and responsive leadership, which suggests that effective crisis

management requires leaders to be adaptable and willing to adjust strategies as situations change.

These findings contribute to the growing body of literature on leadership during the Covid-19 pandemic to address the gaps in the literature identified in the introduction of this study. The findings demonstrate that servant leadership was effective in crisis management during the Covid-19 pandemic in Ghana. This provides empirical support for the effectiveness of servant leadership in crisis management. They provide empirical support for the effectiveness of servant leadership in crisis management. However, it is important to note the limitations of this study. As a single case study, the findings may not be fully generalizable to other contexts. Cultural, political, and economic factors in Ghana may have influenced the effectiveness of the leadership approach. In addition, the study's reliance on secondary data means that the authors did not have full control over the design of the study.

Future research could address these limitations by conducting a comparative study across multiple countries to identify common effective leadership practices during pandemics. Future research may also consider how servant leadership principles can be integrated into existing crisis management frameworks and public health systems. Practically, future research may also investigate the long-term impacts of servant leadership approaches on public trust and compliance with health measures in post-pandemic scenarios. Also, examine the role of traditional and religious leaders in supporting government-led pandemic responses.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Kwame Asamoah: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.
Emmanuel Kems Bigodza: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Resources, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation.

Ethical statement

This study complied with all ethical standards that guides a scientific study.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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