

Lean Thinking and Organizational Culture in African Non-Profits: A Sociological Analysis of Efficiency and Accountability in Development Organizations

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Abstract Non-profit organizations in Africa play a pivotal role in advancing social and economic development, yet many continue to grapple with inefficiencies, resource constraints, and accountability challenges that undermine their effectiveness. Traditional management approaches, often transplanted from corporate or donor-driven models, have not always addressed the unique operational realities of the African development sector. This paper explores the application of Lean Thinking as an innovative management framework to enhance efficiency and strengthen accountability in African development organizations. Drawing on a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature and selected policy reports, the study examines how Lean principles such as waste reduction, continuous improvement, and value creation for beneficiaries can be adapted to the non-profit context. The review integrates insights from global and African scholars to highlight three core areas where Lean Thinking is particularly relevant: (i) optimizing resource utilization in environments with chronic financial and infrastructural limitations, (ii) improving operational processes to accelerate service delivery and reduce duplication, and (iii) embedding accountability mechanisms that align donor expectations with community-driven outcomes. The findings suggest that Lean Thinking fosters a culture of efficiency, responsiveness, and transparency, while also enhancing the legitimacy of non-profits in the eyes of stakeholders. However, the review also reveals that successful adoption of Lean thinking principles requires contextual adaptation to local cultures, participatory structures, and the often-complex governance arrangements within NGOs. This paper contributes to the literature on management innovation in the African non-profit sector by positioning Lean Thinking not merely as a cost-saving tool, but as a comprehensive approach for value creation and accountability. It offers practical implications for managers, policymakers, and donors seeking to improve organizational performance and sustainability within development ecosystems.

Keywords: *Lean Thinking, non-profit management, efficiency, accountability, development organizations, Africa*

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1. Introduction

The role of non-profit organizations (NPOs) has taken a central role in promoting social and economic development in Africa. They bridge important education, health, livelihood, and governance gaps in areas where state and market processes fail. Nevertheless, NPOs encounter an incessant problem of efficiency, sustainability, and accountability. Their performance suffers due to the lack of funding, excessive reliance on donors, bureaucracy, and poor performance management mechanisms [1,2]. Such problems are especially severe in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the shortage of resources is exacerbated by intricate socio-political operating conditions and increasing pressure on transparency by donors and communities [3,4].

In this regard, the pursuit of alternative management approaches has become of great significance. Lean Thinking, a philosophy that was developed in the Japanese automotive industry and focuses on waste elimination, continuous improvement, and the provision of value to the end user, is one such approach [5]. Although initially designed for manufacturing, Lean was later implemented in healthcare, education, and the public sector [6,7]. Its possible applicability to the non-profit industry lies in its emphasis on doing more with less, value creation for stakeholders, and promoting a culture of learning and adaptation—attributes that are relevant to the working reality of NPOs [8,9].

In the case of African NPOs, Lean Thinking may offer an instrument for solving repeated management bottlenecks. Lean provides a resource optimization channel by restructuring organizational processes to achieve value creation for beneficiaries and eliminating

wasteful actions in resource-constrained settings [10]. It also promotes greater accountability, as process mapping, standardization, and continuous monitoring can ensure that donor funding is transparently organized and coordinated with community needs [11,12].

Meanwhile, the flexibility of Lean allows the inclusion of local involvement and cultural dynamics, which play a key role in the African context where development work primarily relies on community participation and legitimacy [13,14].

However, there is limited research on the application of Lean Thinking in non-profit organizations in Africa, even though it has much potential. The current literature is predominantly corporate or Western-based, focusing on public services, and does not provide insight into the potential application of Lean principles to non-profit organizations within African developmental ecosystems [2,7]. The importance of filling this gap is not only theoretical but also practical, as managers and donors increasingly demand frameworks that deliver efficiency and accountability without compromising mission-driven goals. This paper aims to critically review the literature on Lean Thinking and evaluate its potential as a management innovation to enhance efficiency and accountability in African development organisations. Through the integration of global and regional literature, the study establishes ways in which Lean principles can be adapted to meet resource constraints, enhance operational efficiency, and increase transparency. Thus, it adds to the body of literature on management innovation and non-profit accountability, and provides valuable information to managers, donors, and policy-makers interested in creating more sustainable and reputable organisations in Africa.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Origins and Evolution of Lean Thinking

Lean Thinking has its roots in the Toyota Production System (TPS) in post-war Japan, whose key elements were waste reduction (*muda*), continuous improvement (*Kaizen*), and customer value [15]. Early research identified Lean as a source of competitive advantage in manufacturing, enabling organizations to maximize efficiency and responsiveness. The principles were later codified by Womack and Jones [16], expanding their scope to industries beyond automotive production. Over time, Lean evolved from a collection of operational techniques such as value-stream mapping and just-in-time production into a broader philosophy of organizational learning and cultural change [17].

2.2. Lean Thinking Services and Non-Profit.

The use of Lean thinking in the service industry has been evident since the early 2000s. Research within the healthcare field demonstrates that patient flow, cost reduction, and quality outcomes have significantly improved through the implementation of Lean practices [20,21]. Similarly, higher education institutions have adopted Lean methodologies to streamline administrative

operations and enhance service delivery for students [22,23].

However, the application of Lean in non-profit organizations remains limited. Bhatnagar and Mehta [24] argue that Lean provides non-profits with a practical opportunity to maximise scarce resources while maintaining their mission-driven focus. Moreso, Ebener et al. [25] assert that the operational challenges facing development organisations, such as inefficiency, duplication, and weak accountability, can be effectively addressed through Lean's emphasis on efficiency, transparency, and adaptability.

However, scholars caution against applying Lean principles to the non-profit sector without careful adaptation. McMullin and Raggo [2] warn that non-profits must customize Lean to align with participatory and mission-oriented values, rather than treating it as a purely managerial tool. This view is supported by recent evidence suggesting that Lean's true value lies not merely in cost reduction but in cultivating a culture of continuous learning, organizational accountability, and legitimacy within mission-driven institutions [26].

Thus, Lean Thinking extends beyond its industrial foundation, serving as a transformative framework for improving efficiency and accountability in non-profit organizations.

2.3. Effectiveness Challenges in African Non-Profit Organizations

African non-profit organizations operate under chronic structural and resource constraints. Funding flows are often unpredictable, donor-dependent, and subject to restrictive reporting requirements [27]. Inefficiencies frequently emerge when organizations implement projects that are poorly aligned with community needs, experience delays in execution, or duplicate existing services [28].

Furthermore, accountability structures in many development programs tend to prioritize upward accountability to donors over downward accountability to beneficiary communities [29,30]. This imbalance erodes trust, weakens local ownership, and limits the long-term sustainability of interventions. Scholars also emphasize that inefficiency is not merely a technical issue but a structural problem, rooted in fragmented institutional contexts, bureaucratic barriers, and limited managerial capacity within the non-profit sector [31,32].

As a result, a credibility gap persists between the critical role African non-profits play in development and their perceived effectiveness. Despite their importance in service delivery and community empowerment, many organizations struggle to demonstrate measurable impact and accountability, thereby undermining confidence among both donors and the populations they serve.

2.4. Non-profit Management Accountability

Accountability within the non-profit sector encompasses multiple dimensions, including financial, performance, and participatory accountability [33]. In African contexts, these dimensions often coexist in tension, particularly between upward accountability to donors and downward accountability to the communities

served [34]. As Burger and Owens [35] observe, donor-driven reporting systems frequently overlook community perspectives, creating gaps in legitimacy and local ownership.

Recent scholarship advances the concept of learning-centered accountability, emphasizing stakeholder engagement and adaptive management practices [2,36]. This model shifts accountability from a compliance-based approach to a process of shared learning, reflection, and improvement. Lean Thinking aligns naturally with this evolution by embedding transparency and continuous improvement into everyday operations. Tools such as visual management boards, standardized workflows, and performance metrics enable organizations to track progress, promote clarity, and enhance communication across all levels [37].

Such mechanisms strengthen both upward and downward accountability, aligning donor requirements with community priorities. In doing so, Lean fosters a balance between performance efficiency and social legitimacy, positioning accountability as a participatory process that supports organizational learning and trust among stakeholders.

2.5. Lean Thinking and African Development Organizations

Recent literature highlights that management innovations tailored to African realities can substantially improve organizational performance [38,39]. When contextualized appropriately, Lean Thinking has demonstrated potential to enhance resource allocation, process efficiency, and accountability within development-oriented institutions [40].

In public health, for instance, Lean-based approaches have optimized resource use by reducing waste and streamlining service delivery in limited-resource settings [41]. Similarly, evidence from non-profit education and community projects shows that Lean principles can strengthen operational effectiveness by minimizing duplication and aligning activities with organizational missions [25,42].

Within African development organizations, the application of Lean Thinking has been observed in three main areas:

- **Resource Optimization** – ensuring limited donor resources are directed toward activities that deliver the greatest value to communities.
- **Process Improvement** – simplifying workflows, reducing duplication, and accelerating service delivery.
- **Accountability Enhancement** – embedding clear monitoring and reporting systems that benefit both donors and beneficiaries.

However, effective implementation requires sensitivity to local cultural norms, participatory structures, and governance systems [35]. As Banks and Hulme [35] emphasize, imposing externally derived management models without contextual adaptation risks undermining community ownership and legitimacy. Lean's flexibility makes it compatible with Africa's participatory traditions, supporting the broader movement toward decolonizing development management by encouraging frameworks that are locally grounded rather than externally imposed [43].

Thus, Lean Thinking offers a balanced path between efficiency and inclusivity, positioning African development organizations to achieve higher impact while maintaining legitimacy and responsiveness to community needs.

2.6. Research Opportunity and Conceptual Gaps

Although Lean Thinking has gained global recognition for improving efficiency and accountability, its systematic application within African non-profit organizations remains significantly underexplored [44]. Most existing studies focus on corporate or public-sector contexts in high-income countries, producing limited insights into how Lean principles operate under the socio-economic and cultural realities of Africa [45,46].

Furthermore, research on Lean adoption in the Global South often overlooks contextual mediators such as local governance structures, cultural norms, and stakeholder power dynamics [47]. These factors are crucial in determining whether efficiency-driven management approaches can coexist with community-centered development models [48]. Without empirical evidence that integrates these social dimensions, Lean risks being perceived merely as a cost-reduction mechanism rather than a participatory management framework that enhances accountability and legitimacy.

A deeper investigation into how Lean can be localized, interpreted, and embedded within African development organizations is therefore necessary. Such research will contribute to both theoretical and practical advancements theoretically by extending Lean's boundaries into sociological and institutional domains, and practically by offering evidence-based strategies for improving performance, transparency, and stakeholder trust in non-profit management [49,50].

By addressing this knowledge gap, the present study aims to reframe Lean Thinking as a context-sensitive, community-responsive management approach that aligns operational efficiency with inclusive development principles.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to examine how Lean Thinking improves efficiency and accountability in African development organizations. The SLR is widely recognized in management and social sciences for its systematic, transparent, and replicable procedures for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing literature [51]. Unlike narrative reviews, which rely more on author discretion and are typically non-systematic, SLRs follow explicit guidelines that minimize bias and increase validity and reproducibility [52].

This approach was selected because research on Lean Thinking within non-profit and development contexts particularly in Africa, is fragmented and multidisciplinary. By integrating insights from operations management, development studies, and organizational theory, the SLR provides a holistic, cross-disciplinary synthesis of current scholars.

3.2. Search Strategy

An extensive search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, Emerald Insight, Taylor & Francis Online, Wiley Online Library, JSTOR, and SpringerLink, chosen for their breadth of peer-reviewed content across management, economics, organizational studies, and development research.

Search strings combined Boolean operators and truncation, for example:

- “Lean Thinking” OR “Lean Management” AND “non-profit” OR “NGO” OR “third sector”
- “Lean Thinking” OR “Lean practices” AND “accountability” AND “development organizations”
- “Lean Thinking” AND “Africa” OR “developing countries”
- “Efficiency” AND “accountability” AND “non-profit management”

Keywords were applied to titles, abstracts, and author keywords. Backward and forward citation tracking (snowballing) supplemented database results to enhance both coverage and depth.

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

To ensure relevance and quality, the following inclusion criteria were applied:

- **Publication type:** Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters from reputable academic publishers, and policy reports with clear methodological grounding.
- **Time frame:** 2005–2024, with emphasis on recent work to capture current theoretical and practical developments.
- **Geographic scope:** Studies focused on Africa or developing countries, and global studies transferable to these settings.
- **Topical relevance:** Lean Thinking, non-profit management, organizational efficiency, or accountability mechanisms.

Exclusion criteria removed non-peer-reviewed or non-English sources and studies focused solely on technical Lean tools in manufacturing without managerial or organizational implications. This ensured that the analyzed evidence remained reliable, relevant, and aligned with the study objectives.

3.4. Screening and Selection Process

The initial search returned approximately 1,200 records. After duplicate removal, titles and abstracts were screened using the stated criteria, yielding 212 articles. Full-text review produced 72 studies for synthesis.

The process followed the PRISMA framework to enhance transparency and reproducibility [53]. A PRISMA flow diagram documented the stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion.

3.5. Data Extraction and Coding

For each included study, bibliographic and methodological information was extracted (author(s), year,

publication, geographic context, sectoral scope, Lean principles/tools, and links to efficiency, accountability, and organizational performance).

Studies were then coded into thematic categories anchored in Lean Thinking principles. The coding framework was developed iteratively to surface recurring patterns across the literature [54]. This inductive approach enabled flexible categorization and revealed relationships among findings drawn from diverse sources.

3.6. Analytical Approach

A thematic review guided synthesis across heterogeneous studies, an appropriate strategy for identifying patterns in varied evidence bases [55]. Findings were organized under three overarching themes:

- **Resource Optimization:** How Lean helps non-profits reduce waste and use scarce resources effectively.
- **Process Improvement:** How Lean techniques support efficiency, consistency, and service delivery in development organizations.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** How Lean contributes to transparency, performance tracking, and stakeholder confidence in non-profit operations.

Comparisons between global and African-based studies highlighted convergences and divergences, ensuring both contextual sensitivity and theoretical relevance.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

No human participants were involved. Only peer-reviewed or methodologically sound sources were included. All sources are cited and referenced according to the journal’s numeric style. The inclusion and exclusion criteria were explicitly reported to reduce bias and uphold research integrity.

3.8. Limitations of the Methodology

Limitations include the exclusion of non-English literature, which may omit work from French- and Portuguese-speaking African contexts; reliance on secondary sources, which constrains conclusions to the quality and scope of available studies; and potential underrepresentation of grey literature, which may overlook grassroots implementations of Lean Thinking. Despite these constraints, the systematic and thematic approach offers a robust foundation for assessing Lean’s relevance to the African non-profit sector.

4. Findings

The systematic review of 72 peer-reviewed publications and selected policy reports revealed three broad themes demonstrating that Lean Thinking can enhance the efficiency and accountability of African development organizations. These themes are:

- I. Resource Optimization,
- II. Process Improvement, and
- III. Accountability Mechanisms.

4.1. Resource Optimization

The scarcity of resources remains one of the most persistent challenges facing non-profit organizations in Africa. Studies show that donor funding is often volatile, project-based, and bound by strict reporting conditions [1,2]. These constraints are compounded by inefficient resource utilization, such as duplicated services, high administrative costs, and slow disbursement processes.

Lean Thinking offers a framework for maximizing limited resources by eliminating waste and promoting value creation. For instance, Bhatnagar and Mehta [3] demonstrate that Lean principles can reduce redundancies in program management by simplifying workflows. Similarly, Ebener et al. [4] find that Lean-inspired development organizations improve efficiency by aligning resource allocation with mission-driven objectives.

Evidence from African public-health systems further highlights the relevance of Lean to resource optimization. Kabene and King [5] report that Lean techniques minimized wastage of medical supplies and ensured the targeted distribution of scarce resources. More recent applications in East Africa show how Lean enhances supply-chain management in donor-funded programs [6]. These examples indicate that, when adapted appropriately, Lean enables non-profits to achieve more with fewer financial and human resources.

The literature also emphasizes that resource optimization is not purely a technical matter but a cultural transformation. Organizations adopting Lean must shift from short-term project delivery to long-term value creation [7]. This cultural shift is particularly important for African non-profits, where mission-driven goals often conflict with donor priorities. Lean Thinking helps bridge this gap by harmonizing the allocation of resources with both community needs and donor expectations.

4.2. Process Improvement

Inefficient internal processes are another recurring theme in the literature on African non-profits. Bureaucratic delays, duplicated efforts, and fragmented service delivery undermine performance [8]. Many organizations struggle to implement effective strategies due to limited managerial capacity and weak monitoring and evaluation systems [9,10].

Lean Thinking emphasizes process mapping, standardization, and continuous improvement, providing non-profits with tools to redesign workflows. Radnor, Bateman, and Esain [11] note that Lean's adaptability to non-manufacturing contexts lies in its focus on process improvement. Empirical evidence shows that Lean reduces delays, improves service delivery, and enhances user satisfaction in public-service settings [12], lessons that can be transferred to the non-profit sector.

Process inefficiencies are most visible in donor reporting, procurement, and field implementation among African development organizations. Sponseller and Lohan [13] demonstrate that Lean-based process mapping improved the efficiency of aid delivery during humanitarian crises by reducing supply-chain bottlenecks. Likewise, research in African higher-education and health institutions shows that continuous-improvement programs

grounded in Lean principles enhance administrative quality and efficiency [14,7].

Importantly, process improvement also entails cultural engagement. Continuous improvement requires the involvement of staff at all organizational levels, not merely top-down directives [15]. In African non-profits, this means involving both field staff and community representatives in redesigning workflows to ensure contextual relevance and sustainability.

4.3. Accountability Mechanisms

Accountability remains a defining challenge for African non-profits, often caught between upward accountability to donors and downward accountability to beneficiaries [16]. Donor-driven accountability typically focuses on compliance and financial reporting, while communities expect responsiveness and legitimacy [17,2]. Weak accountability frameworks erode trust and damage organizational credibility.

Lean Thinking contributes to accountability on two levels.

First, it introduces transparency tools such as visual-management boards and standardized reporting systems [12]. These mechanisms allow managers to monitor progress in real time and provide performance evidence to donors.

Second, Lean emphasizes value for end-users, ensuring that accountability mechanisms reflect community priorities rather than donor checklists [10].

Ebener et al. [4] show that Lean principles improved transparency in an NGO by mapping value streams that linked donor inputs to community outcomes. Similarly, in African contexts, Lean has been combined with community-based monitoring, enabling beneficiaries to co-determine program effectiveness [6].

Nonetheless, some scholars caution that poorly adapted Lean-based accountability systems may reinforce donor dominance, prioritizing upward reporting at the expense of downward engagement [18]. Therefore, Lean must remain context-sensitive, balancing shared responsibility between donors and communities.

4.4. Synthesis of Themes

The review findings suggest that Lean Thinking offers significant potential to address efficiency and accountability challenges in African development organizations, though its application requires contextual adaptation.

- **Resource Optimization:** Lean enables organizations to minimize waste and maximize value—critical in resource-constrained environments.
- **Process Improvement:** Lean provides practical methods to redesign workflows, enhance timeliness, and cultivate cultures of continuous learning.
- **Accountability Mechanisms:** Lean strengthens both upward and downward accountability but must be carefully adapted to prevent over-centralization of donor control.

Collectively, these themes demonstrate that Lean Thinking is not a rigid or universal formula but a flexible management philosophy. Its successful application in

African non-profits depends on cultural awareness, stakeholder participation, and alignment with the broader values of sustainable development.

5. Discussion

The systematic review identified three central themes: resource optimization, process improvement, and accountability mechanisms, which together demonstrate the potential of Lean Thinking to enhance the performance of African non-profit organizations in terms of efficiency and accountability. This section discusses the findings in relation to management theories, empirical evidence, and the broader African context.

5.1. Lean Thinking as a Non-Profit Management Innovation

Although originally developed for manufacturing, Lean Thinking has gradually expanded into public and service-oriented sectors [1,12]. Its diffusion beyond industrial contexts illustrates its adaptability as a philosophy capable of transforming organizational practices [7]. Applying Lean to African non-profits represents an innovative step, given that these organizations operate in environments characterized by systemic scarcity and heightened accountability pressures. Non-profit missions align naturally with Lean's goals of eliminating waste and maximizing value. Rather than focusing on profit margins, Lean emphasizes stakeholder value creation, where donors and beneficiary communities constitute the primary "customers" [3]. This redefinition challenges conventional measures of effectiveness in the non-profit sector, positioning Lean as a philosophy that aligns operational discipline with developmental missions. It further supports McMullin and Raggo's [10] assertion that management innovations in NPOs achieve the greatest impact when they simultaneously enhance legitimacy and accountability.

5.2. Optimization of Resources and the Economics of Scarcity

African non-profits routinely face resource shortages aggravated by donor dependency, fragmented funding, and administrative inefficiencies [1,2]. Lean Thinking offers a systematic means to identify non-value-adding activities and redirect resources toward areas of greatest impact [4].

This principle resonates with the Resource-Based View (RBV), which holds that organizations gain advantage through efficient utilization of scarce resources [19]. Within NPOs, Lean operationalizes this theory by providing tools that help stretch donor funding and ensure human resources are directed toward mission-critical activities. Kabene and King [5] observed such benefits in African healthcare initiatives, where Lean practices reduced wastage of essential supplies and improved service equity.

However, optimization is not purely technical; it is inherently contextual. As Olajide [6] argues, long-term efficiency gains depend on balancing donor requirements

with community needs. Thus, within the African development context, optimization should be viewed as a relational process, integrating external accountability demands with local legitimacy imperatives.

5.3. Process Improvement and Organizational Learning

The review also identified Lean's strong contribution to organizational process improvement. Many African NPOs struggle with bureaucratic inefficiencies, duplication of services, and weak monitoring systems [8]. These inefficiencies can be mitigated through Lean tools such as process mapping, standardization, and continuous improvement (Kaizen) [11].

Humanitarian operations provide practical illustrations. Sponseller and Lohan [13] found that Lean-based process mapping reduced delays in emergency aid delivery, facilitating faster responses to affected populations. Similarly, Costa et al. [7] documented improvements in workflow and service quality in education and health settings through Lean interventions.

These findings correspond with organizational learning theory, which underscores adaptation and continuous improvement as hallmarks of resilient organizations [20]. Hines, Holweg, and Rich [15] emphasize that Lean's greatest contribution lies not in its technical tools but in fostering a culture of iterative learning. For African NPOs, embedding Lean in organizational culture and involving frontline staff and community representatives in process redesign, is vital to ensuring relevance and sustainability. Without such participation, Lean risks devolving into a compliance exercise rather than a transformative philosophy [12].

5.4. Accountability and Stakeholder Trust

Accountability remains one of the most persistent challenges facing African non-profits. Donors demand financial transparency and efficiency, while communities expect responsiveness and legitimacy [16,17]. Lean Thinking strengthens accountability by introducing transparency tools such as visual management dashboards, standardized reporting structures, and performance metrics that build donor confidence [12]. At the same time, Lean's focus on stakeholder value reinforces downward accountability to communities [10].

This dual orientation aligns with stakeholder theory, which posits that organizations sustain legitimacy by balancing the interests of multiple stakeholder groups [21]. By enabling efficiency "upward" and responsiveness "downward," Lean fosters both trust and credibility. However, critical scholars warn that uncritical adoption of Lean may entrench donor dominance and marginalize community engagement [18,2]. Hence, Lean-based accountability must be selectively inclusive, integrating participatory governance approaches to ensure that efficiency does not compromise equity.

5.5. Contextual Adaptation

Despite its promise, applying Lean Thinking within African NPOs presents several challenges. Most Lean

tools were designed for structured production systems, not the fluid and unpredictable environments typical of development organizations. Measuring intangible outcomes such as empowerment or capacity building, is particularly difficult [4]. Similarly, sustaining continuous improvement can be challenging for organizations with high staff turnover or limited capacity.

Lean adaptation must also contend with external pressures. Rigid donor-reporting frameworks often leave little room for experimentation, while local cultural dynamics may conflict with standardized procedures [2]. These contextual realities suggest that Lean should not be treated as a prescriptive toolkit but as a guiding philosophy adaptable to African organizational cultures and development values.

5.6. Practice and Policy Implications

For practitioners, the findings indicate that Lean can enhance efficiency and accountability if contextually customized. Managers should prioritize capacity building and nurture cultures of continuous improvement [11]. Donors, meanwhile, should adopt flexible funding mechanisms that encourage experimentation rather than rigid compliance [9]. Policymakers can facilitate cross-sector learning platforms to promote knowledge exchange on Lean applications across public, private, and non-profit sectors.

5.7. Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes theoretically by contextualizing Lean Thinking within African mission-driven organizations. It integrates Lean with three major management theories: the Resource-Based View (RBV) [19], Organizational Learning Theory [20], and Stakeholder Theory [21]. The review reconceptualizes Lean from a cost-cutting framework into a value-creating, legitimacy-enhancing, and participatory accountability paradigm offering a novel lens for analyzing management innovation in non-profit organizations.

Overall, Lean Thinking offers African non-profits a structured yet flexible philosophy for addressing efficiency and accountability challenges. However, its success depends on careful contextualization and active participation. When applied inclusively, Lean can enhance legitimacy, strengthen stakeholder trust, and make development interventions more sustainable.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusion

This paper critically reviewed the literature on Lean Thinking in non-profit management and its potential role in enhancing efficiency and accountability within African development organizations. The findings suggest that Lean provides a valuable paradigm for addressing three interrelated challenges faced by African non-profits: resource maximization, process improvement, and accountability systems.

First, Lean emphasizes the elimination of waste and the

optimization of value a structured approach that enables organizations to make the fullest use of their limited resources. Such an orientation is particularly relevant in contexts where financial uncertainty and vast social needs require careful allocation of scarce resources to achieve the greatest possible impact [1,4].

Second, Lean is associated with effective process-improvement methods such as value-stream mapping, continuous-improvement cycles, and standard workflows. These tools minimize duplication, improve timeliness, and foster organizational learning cultures that are vital in the dynamic and uncertain environment of non-profits [7,11].

Third, Lean strengthens accountability by promoting transparency and linking donor inputs to community outcomes. This two-way responsibility—upward to donors and downward to beneficiaries—supports calls for more inclusive accountability frameworks in development work [10,16].

The research contributes to knowledge by extending the concept of Lean Thinking to African non-profits. It demonstrates that Lean is not confined to production or service efficiency; it can also serve as a management principle for mission-driven organizations. The review situates Lean within broader theoretical perspectives, including the resource-based view [19], organizational learning theory [20], and stakeholder theory [21].

6.2. Practical Recommendations

For Non-Profit Managers

- **Lean as an Organizational Philosophy:** Treat Lean as a guiding philosophy rather than a technical instrument. Sustainable efficiency gains require cultural change, continuous improvement, and the engagement of all staff members, not a narrow focus on tools alone [15].
- **Capacity Building and Organizational Learning:** Invest in staff training on Lean tools such as process mapping and visual management to strengthen organizational learning, adaptability, and responsiveness.
- **Balancing Efficiency with Inclusiveness and Legitimacy:** Balance efficiency goals with inclusiveness. Define “value” collaboratively and co-design improvement processes so that Lean practices do not undermine organizational legitimacy.

For Donors

- **Provide Flexible Funding:** Rigid, compliance-driven funding models restrict innovation and experimentation. Flexible funding arrangements would allow NPOs to adapt Lean practices to local realities [9].
- **Promote Learning-Oriented Accountability:** Support accountability systems that combine financial transparency with community-based feedback and organizational learning rather than focusing solely on compliance.

For Policymakers

- **Establish Facilitating Conditions:** Governments and regional bodies can encourage Lean adoption by reducing bureaucratic barriers, building capacity, and supporting partnerships among non-profits, public institutions, and the private sector.

- **Institutionalize Knowledge Sharing:** Promote sector-wide learning platforms to exchange best practices and lessons from Lean implementation across sectors.

6.3. Future Research Recommendations

Although this review highlights the potential of Lean in African non-profits, several gaps remain.

- **Sector-Specific Studies:** Empirical research is needed on Lean implementation within particular sectors such as health, education, and livelihoods.
- **Cultural Dimensions:** Future studies should examine how African participatory traditions and community values can be integrated into Lean systems.
- **Comparative Analyses:** Cross-regional comparisons between African and non-African NPOs would illuminate contextual differences in Lean adoption.
- **Longitudinal Research:** Long-term studies should assess the sustainability of Lean-inspired organizational changes within development settings.

6.4. Final Reflections

Lean Thinking is often perceived merely as a cost-saving technique. However, this review has shown that, when interpreted through a developmental lens, Lean represents a transformative management philosophy that not only enhances efficiency and accountability but also builds trust and legitimacy.

In African development organizations, where resource scarcity and legitimacy pressures are acute, Lean provides a structured yet adaptable pathway for organizational improvement. The central question is not whether Lean can be applied in African NPOs, but how it can be adapted to respect local cultures, empower communities, and address diverse stakeholder expectations.

By embracing Lean as a philosophy of value creation, learning, and trust-building, African non-profits can position themselves as more effective, credible, and sustainable actors in the broader development landscape.

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