ETHICAL LEADERSHIP, GOOD GOVERNANCE, AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN KOGI STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

Ethical leadership has increasingly been recognized as a critical determinant of governance quality and sustainable development, yet its role within Nigeria's public governance system remains insufficiently examined. This study investigated the relationship among ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development in Nigeria with the objective of examining how ethical leadership influences governance effectiveness and how good governance contributes to sustainable development outcomes. The study was anchored on Ethical Leadership Theory, which explains that leaders influence institutional behaviour through integrity, accountability, transparency, fairness, and responsible decision making. A qualitative research approach was adopted, relying on secondary sources of data obtained from peer reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, official government publications, and reports from reputable international organizations. Data were subjected to qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and relationships among the key variables. The findings revealed that ethical leadership strengthens governance institutions by promoting accountability, transparency, public trust, responsible management of public resources, and effective policy implementation. The study further established that good governance serves as the institutional mechanism through which ethical leadership translates into sustainable development by enhancing public service delivery, citizen participation, institutional effectiveness, and equitable socioeconomic development. The review also identified significant theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps in existing literature, particularly the tendency to examine ethical leadership, governance, and sustainable development as separate concepts rather than as interdependent dimensions of public administration. The study concludes that sustainable development in Nigeria depends substantially on institutionalizing ethical leadership within governance structures. It recommends strengthening ethical leadership development, reinforcing accountability institutions, improving transparency mechanisms, and embedding ethical principles in public

sector governance to enhance sustainable national development.

Introduction

The relationship between ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development has become central to contemporary debates on public administration, especially in developing societies where institutional weaknesses, accountability deficits, and resource governance challenges continue to constrain development outcomes. Ethical leadership emphasizes integrity, transparency, responsibility, fairness, and the prioritization of public interest over private benefits, while good governance provides the institutional mechanisms through which public resources are managed effectively and development objectives are achieved (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Rothstein, 2018). Sustainable development, therefore, depends not only on economic growth or infrastructural expansion but also on the quality of leadership and governance systems that determine whether development gains are inclusive, accountable, and enduring (United Nations, 2023). In Nigeria, the discourse on governance failure has largely focused on corruption, weak institutions, elite dominance, and ineffective public sector management, with less analytical attention given to the ethical foundations of leadership practices and their implications for sustainable development outcomes at the subnational level (Adebayo & Ojo, 2021; Onwe & Chijioke, 2022).

Existing scholarship has significantly advanced understanding of the connections between governance quality and development performance; however, important gaps remain. Academically, much of the literature has examined ethical leadership and good governance from a national perspective, with limited empirical interrogation of how ethical leadership practices influence governance effectiveness and sustainable development at the state level. Studies on Nigeria's development challenges have often concentrated on federal institutions, corruption, electoral politics, and macroeconomic reforms, thereby creating insufficient knowledge about the everyday leadership practices, administrative cultures, and accountability mechanisms that shape development outcomes within individual states (Agbiboa, 2020; Okafor, 2021). Furthermore, while previous studies recognize the importance of governance reforms, they have rarely integrated ethical leadership as a foundational explanatory variable in understanding why some public institutions achieve better development outcomes despite operating within similar national constraints. This study responds to this theoretical and empirical gap by examining ethical leadership as a critical driver of governance quality and sustainable development in Kogi State.

Practically, the persistent development challenges experienced in Kogi State, including concerns relating to public sector accountability, infrastructure deficits, service delivery limitations, and the effective management of public resources, raise questions about the extent to which leadership values and governance practices influence development trajectories. Although successive administrations have introduced policies aimed at improving socioeconomic conditions, the translation of public resources and government programmes into sustainable development outcomes remains a major concern among citizens and development stakeholders. The practical gap, therefore, lies in the limited understanding of how leadership ethics, institutional accountability, and governance practices interact

to either promote or constrain sustainable development at the state level. Addressing this gap is important because sustainable development requires more than policy formulation; it requires leadership systems capable of ensuring transparency, responsible decision making, and equitable distribution of development benefits (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022).

The research problem of this study emerges from the contradiction between the availability of development resources and persistent governance challenges that limit sustainable development outcomes in Kogi State. While considerable attention has been devoted to economic, political, and institutional explanations of Nigeria's development difficulties, insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to the ethical dimensions of leadership and how they shape governance performance at the state level. The absence of a focused analysis of the relationship between ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development creates a knowledge deficit regarding the leadership behaviours and institutional practices necessary for improving development outcomes. This study therefore investigates whether ethical leadership provides a viable pathway for strengthening governance systems and advancing sustainable development in Kogi State, Nigeria.

The objectives of this paper are to examine the relationship between ethical leadership practices and the effectiveness of good governance in Kogi State, Nigeria; and to analyse the extent to which ethical leadership and governance practices contribute to sustainable development outcomes within the state.The remaining sections of the paper are structured as follows. The next section reviews relevant literature on ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development, while identifying existing scholarly debates and gaps. The subsequent section presents the theoretical framework guiding the study. The methodology section explains the research design, sources of data, and analytical approach adopted. This is followed by the presentation and discussion of findings, where the study's arguments are compared with existing empirical evidence. The final section concludes the paper by highlighting the contribution of the study to knowledge and providing recommendations for strengthening ethical leadership and governance practices for sustainable development in Kogi State.

Literature Review

The growing scholarly interest in ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development reflects an increasing recognition that development outcomes are not determined solely by economic resources, institutional arrangements, or policy frameworks, but also by the values, behaviours, and accountability orientations of leaders who manage public institutions. Ethical leadership has emerged as an important analytical concept because it explains how leaders influence organizational conduct through personal integrity, moral decision making, fairness, transparency, and the promotion of ethical standards among followers. In the public sector context, ethical leadership is particularly significant because government institutions are entrusted with collective resources and are expected to pursue public interest rather than private or sectional benefits. Consequently, understanding the connection between leadership ethics and governance performance provides an important basis for explaining variations in development outcomes across societies.

Brown and Treviño (2006) provided one of the earliest influential conceptual explanations of ethical leadership by defining it as the

demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, including the promotion of such conduct among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision making. Using a conceptual review approach that integrated leadership ethics, social learning theory, and organizational behaviour literature, the authors argued that ethical leaders influence employee behaviour because followers observe and imitate leaders' moral conduct. Their analysis established that ethical leadership contributes to trust, commitment, and responsible organizational behaviour. However, the study was largely conceptual and developed primarily from organizational settings within advanced economies. Although its theoretical contribution remains significant, it provided limited explanation of how ethical leadership operates within public institutions characterised by weak accountability structures, political interference, and governance challenges common in developing countries. This limitation creates a contextual gap that requires further investigation into how ethical leadership practices influence governance outcomes in developing societies such as Nigeria.

Building upon this foundation, Brown and Mitchell (2010) examined ethical leadership as a mechanism for reducing unethical behaviour within organizations. The study adopted a comprehensive review of empirical literature on ethical leadership and workplace misconduct, demonstrating that leaders influence ethical climates by establishing expectations, rewarding responsible behaviour, and sanctioning unethical practices. The authors concluded that ethical leadership reduces organizational deviance and strengthens institutional legitimacy. Nevertheless, the study relied predominantly on evidence from private sector organizations and Western institutional environments where regulatory systems and organizational accountability mechanisms are comparatively stronger. The limited attention given to public governance institutions in developing countries leaves unanswered questions regarding whether ethical leadership can produce similar outcomes where political patronage, weak institutions, and administrative inefficiencies constrain governance processes. This research gap is important because public institutions in many developing contexts require ethical leadership not only to improve internal organizational behaviour but also to transform broader governance practices.

A further contribution was made by Yukl et al. (2013), who investigated the relationship between ethical leadership and the effectiveness of organizations through a behavioural perspective. The study employed survey based quantitative methods and examined leadership behaviours associated with integrity, fairness, and accountability. Findings indicated that ethical leadership enhances organizational effectiveness by improving trust, cooperation, and employee motivation. The study expanded understanding of ethical leadership by demonstrating that moral behaviour is not merely an individual characteristic but a leadership process capable of shaping institutional performance. However, the methodology focused largely on organizational level outcomes and did not sufficiently address broader societal consequences such as public accountability, quality of governance, and sustainable development. Therefore, while the study established the organizational benefits of ethical leadership, it left a significant empirical gap concerning how ethical leadership contributes to development outcomes within government institutions.

In a related empirical investigation, Bedi et al. (2016) conducted a meta analysis of ethical

leadership research to examine the consequences and determinants of ethical leadership. By systematically analysing previous empirical studies, the authors found that ethical leadership is positively associated with employee satisfaction, organizational commitment, trust, and ethical climate. The strength of the study lies in its methodological approach because meta analysis provides broader evidence by integrating findings from multiple studies. However, the review revealed that existing ethical leadership research has concentrated heavily on organizational outcomes, with limited attention to governance systems and public development processes. Furthermore, the majority of reviewed studies originated from developed countries, thereby limiting their applicability to contexts where governance institutions face challenges related to corruption, accountability deficits, and weak administrative capacity. This limitation provides justification for examining ethical leadership within the specific context of Nigerian state governance.

Beyond organizational perspectives, scholars have increasingly connected ethical leadership with governance quality. Governance literature emphasizes that effective governance depends on principles such as accountability, transparency, participation, responsiveness, and rule of law. Fukuyama (2013) argued that governance effectiveness is fundamentally linked to the capacity of institutions to implement policies and deliver public services effectively. Using comparative institutional analysis, the study demonstrated that institutional capacity determines whether governments can translate policies into meaningful outcomes. However, Fukuyama's analysis focused primarily on institutional capacity and administrative effectiveness, with less emphasis on the ethical orientation of political and administrative leaders who operate within these institutions. This creates an analytical gap because institutions do not function independently of leadership behaviour. The effectiveness of governance structures often depends on whether leaders demonstrate commitment to accountability, fairness, and responsible use of public authority.

Similarly, Rothstein (2018) examined the relationship between institutional quality, corruption control, and governance effectiveness. Drawing from comparative political analysis, the study argued that impartial institutions are essential for achieving social trust and sustainable development. The methodology relied mainly on cross national governance indicators and institutional assessments to explain variations in governance quality. The study made an important contribution by demonstrating that governance systems characterised by fairness and accountability produce better societal outcomes. However, the use of broad governance indicators limited its ability to explain the micro level leadership practices that shape institutional behaviour. Governance quality is often measured through institutional outcomes, but insufficient attention is given to the ethical values and leadership decisions that produce those outcomes. This study addresses this limitation by positioning ethical leadership as an important explanatory factor in understanding governance performance.

In the African context, Hope (2020) examined governance challenges and development limitations in African states, emphasizing that weak accountability institutions, corruption, and leadership failures continue to undermine development efforts. The study employed qualitative analysis of governance experiences across African countries and argued that sustainable development requires leadership committed to transparency,

institutional strengthening, and public accountability. The contribution of the study lies in linking governance failures to leadership challenges rather than viewing development problems only through economic explanations. However, the analysis remained broad and continental, providing limited attention to subnational governance experiences. The absence of state level empirical analysis creates a contextual gap because governance realities differ significantly among regions and states within countries. This limitation is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where states possess considerable responsibility for development planning and service delivery.

Recent studies have further emphasized the importance of governance quality for sustainable development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2022) highlighted that achieving sustainable development goals requires governance systems built on accountability, inclusion, institutional effectiveness, and citizen participation. Although the report provides extensive evidence from global development experiences, it is largely policy oriented and does not provide detailed empirical examination of how leadership ethics influence governance outcomes. Similarly, the United Nations (2023) emphasized that progress toward sustainable development goals remains constrained by institutional weaknesses, inequality, and governance challenges. However, global assessments often provide aggregate measurements that may overlook the specific leadership and institutional dynamics operating within individual states and local governance systems.

Studies focusing on Nigeria have increasingly examined governance and development challenges but have paid limited attention to ethical leadership as an explanatory variable. Agbiboa (2020) analysed corruption and governance problems in Nigeria through a political economy perspective, arguing that elite competition, institutional weaknesses, and accountability failures have undermined development outcomes. Using qualitative analysis of governance structures and political processes, the study demonstrated that corruption remains a major obstacle to effective development. However, the analysis primarily focused on structural and political explanations and did not sufficiently explore the role of leadership ethics in shaping institutional behaviour. Consequently, the study contributes to understanding governance challenges but leaves a gap regarding how ethical leadership practices may provide pathways for improving governance performance.

Similarly, Okafor (2021) examined institutional quality and development challenges in Nigeria, highlighting the relationship between weak governance structures and poor public service outcomes. The study relied mainly on secondary data and institutional analysis to explain persistent development constraints. Findings indicated that ineffective institutions, limited accountability mechanisms, and administrative weaknesses continue to restrict Nigeria's development progress. However, the study treated institutions as the primary unit of analysis and gave limited attention to leadership behaviour within those institutions. This creates a significant gap because institutional reforms may produce limited results where leadership practices do not support transparency, accountability, and ethical responsibility.

The reviewed literature demonstrates that previous studies have significantly advanced understanding of ethical leadership, governance quality, and sustainable development. However, three major gaps remain. First, existing studies have predominantly examined ethical leadership from organizational perspectives rather than

public governance and development perspectives. Second, much of the governance literature has focused on institutional structures, corruption, and administrative capacity while giving insufficient attention to the ethical orientation of leaders responsible for managing public institutions. Third, empirical studies examining the interaction between ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development at subnational levels in Nigeria remain limited. Existing Nigerian studies have largely concentrated on national governance challenges, thereby overlooking how state level leadership practices influence development outcomes.

This study therefore advances the argument that sustainable development in Kogi State cannot be adequately understood through economic resources or institutional structures alone. Rather, the ethical character of leadership and the governance practices adopted by state institutions represent critical factors determining whether development initiatives produce lasting and inclusive outcomes. By focusing on Kogi State, this research contributes a contextual perspective that bridges the gap between leadership ethics, governance effectiveness, and sustainable development within Nigeria's subnational governance environment. Unlike previous studies that examine these concepts separately, this study integrates them into a single analytical framework to explain how ethical leadership can strengthen governance processes and improve sustainable development outcomes.

Materials and Methods

This study adopted a qualitative research approach using secondary sources of data because the research seeks to critically examine the relationship between ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development within the context of Kogi State, Nigeria. The qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focuses on understanding leadership values, governance practices, institutional behaviours, and development processes that cannot be adequately captured through numerical measurements alone. Secondary data were utilized because they provide access to existing scholarly analyses, official government documents, policy reports, institutional publications, and development assessments that offer comprehensive insights into governance and leadership dynamics over time. This method also enables critical examination of historical trends, institutional experiences, and documented evidence on governance performance. The use of secondary qualitative data enhances analytical depth by allowing the study to compare different perspectives, identify recurring governance patterns, and establish connections between ethical leadership practices and sustainable development outcomes. Therefore, the approach was suitable for generating a contextual and theoretically informed understanding of how leadership ethics influence governance effectiveness and development trajectories in Kogi State, Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Ethical Leadership Theory**,** which was advanced by Michael E. Brown, Linda K. Treviño, and Harrison (2005). The theory posits that effective leadership extends beyond the achievement of organizational objectives to include the demonstration of integrity, honesty, fairness, accountability, transparency, and responsibility in the exercise of authority. Ethical leaders influence followers through morally appropriate conduct, effective communication, equitable decision making, and the consistent reinforcement of ethical standards. According to

the theory, leaders become role models whose behaviour shapes the ethical climate of institutions, encourages public trust, strengthens accountability mechanisms, and promotes responsible governance (Brown et al., 2005).

Ethical Leadership Theory is founded on Social Learning Theory, which argues that individuals learn appropriate behaviour by observing credible and legitimate role models. Within public institutions, political office holders and senior public officials establish behavioural standards that influence the conduct of civil servants and other stakeholders. When leaders consistently demonstrate ethical values such as transparency, justice, respect for the rule of law, and prudent management of public resources, these values become institutional norms that improve governance effectiveness. Conversely, unethical leadership characterized by corruption, abuse of office, favouritism, and lack of accountability weakens institutions, erodes public confidence, and constrains sustainable development.

The theory further argues that ethical leadership promotes good governance by strengthening the core governance principles of accountability, participation, responsiveness, transparency, equity, effectiveness, and adherence to the rule of law. Public institutions led by ethical leaders are more likely to formulate policies that reflect public interest, ensure equitable allocation of resources, encourage citizen participation, and improve service delivery. These governance outcomes create an enabling environment for sustainable development by supporting economic growth, social inclusion, environmental responsibility, and institutional stability.

The relevance of Ethical Leadership Theory to this study lies in its ability to explain how leadership values influence governance quality and ultimately determine development outcomes. In the context of Kogi State, ethical leadership provides a useful analytical lens for understanding whether the conduct of political and administrative leaders promotes transparency in public financial management, accountability in government institutions, equitable implementation of development programmes, and effective delivery of public services. The theory suggests that sustainable development cannot be achieved merely through the availability of financial resources or the formulation of development policies. Rather, development outcomes depend substantially on the ethical orientation of leaders who formulate, implement, and supervise public policies.

This theory is particularly applicable to the Nigerian governance environment, where concerns over corruption, weak accountability, abuse of public office, and institutional inefficiency continue to affect development performance. Ethical Leadership Theory therefore provides a comprehensive explanation for understanding how ethical conduct within leadership structures can strengthen governance institutions and improve sustainable development outcomes. It enables this study to examine ethical leadership not merely as an individual characteristic but as a governance mechanism capable of influencing institutional performance and long term development.

This study applies Ethical Leadership Theory by arguing that ethical leadership serves as the independent variable that shapes the quality of governance through transparency, accountability, integrity, responsiveness, and responsible public administration. Good governance functions as the intervening mechanism through which ethical leadership influences sustainable development outcomes. Where ethical leadership is institutionalized, governance systems become more effective in managing

public resources, delivering essential services, encouraging citizen participation, and promoting equitable development. Conversely, where ethical leadership is weak, governance institutions become vulnerable to corruption, inefficiency, poor policy implementation, and declining public trust, thereby limiting sustainable development. Consequently, the theory provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining the relationship among ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development in Kogi State, Nigeria.

Ethical Leadership, Good Governance, and Sustainable Development in Kogi State, Nigeria

The growing attention devoted to ethical leadership in governance studies reflects a recognition that leadership quality constitutes a fundamental determinant of institutional effectiveness and development outcomes. Ethical leadership has been conceptualized as the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions, decision making, and interpersonal relationships, alongside the promotion of ethical standards within organizations and institutions (Brown & Treviño, 2006). Recent studies have sought to establish the relationship between ethical leadership and governance performance, particularly in contexts characterized by institutional fragility and accountability challenges. For instance, Hassan et al. (2022) investigated the influence of ethical leadership on public sector performance using survey data collected from public institutions in developing countries. The study employed quantitative techniques and found that ethical leadership significantly enhances organizational trust, employee commitment, and accountability. While the study contributes to understanding the organizational benefits of ethical leadership, its emphasis remained largely on internal administrative performance rather than broader governance outcomes. Furthermore, the use of perception based survey data limits the ability to capture the structural and political dimensions of governance. This limitation creates an empirical gap because governance effectiveness extends beyond organizational behaviour to include public accountability, transparency, policy implementation, and development outcomes. This study therefore argues that ethical leadership should be examined not merely as an organizational variable but as a governance mechanism capable of influencing sustainable development.

A related strand of literature has focused on the relationship between ethical leadership and accountability in public institutions. Miao et al. (2023) examined ethical leadership and accountability practices within public organizations through a meta analytical review of empirical studies. Their findings revealed that leaders who demonstrate integrity, fairness, and transparency tend to strengthen institutional accountability and reduce unethical conduct. The methodological strength of the study lies in its use of multiple empirical datasets, which enhances the reliability of its conclusions. Nevertheless, most of the studies reviewed originated from developed countries with relatively stable governance systems and strong institutional frameworks. Consequently, the findings provide limited insight into how ethical leadership operates within governance environments characterized by weak institutions, patronage networks, and corruption challenges. In Nigeria, where governance failures often stem from systemic and institutional factors, ethical leadership may interact differently with accountability mechanisms. This contextual gap suggests the need for studies that examine accountability not merely as an organizational

outcome but as a governance process shaped by broader political and institutional realities.

The issue of transparency has also attracted considerable scholarly attention within the governance literature. Transparency is widely regarded as a core element of good governance because it enhances public trust, improves access to information, and promotes responsible management of public resources. Cucciniello et al. (2024) explored transparency and public sector governance using comparative evidence from emerging economies. Employing mixed methods involving governance indicators and policy analysis, the study concluded that transparency contributes positively to institutional legitimacy and citizen confidence. However, the study primarily measured transparency through access to information frameworks and disclosure mechanisms, thereby overlooking the role of leadership ethics in determining whether transparency initiatives are genuinely implemented or merely symbolic. This methodological limitation is significant because transparency policies often fail in contexts where leaders lack commitment to ethical governance. This study therefore departs from existing scholarship by arguing that transparency should not be treated solely as an institutional mechanism but also as a product of ethical leadership behaviour.

Another significant issue concerns the relationship between ethical leadership and corruption control. Corruption remains one of the most persistent obstacles to governance effectiveness and sustainable development in many developing countries. Khan et al. (2022) examined anti corruption strategies and governance outcomes across several African countries using comparative institutional analysis. Their findings suggest that anti corruption reforms are most effective where political leaders demonstrate commitment to ethical conduct and institutional accountability. While the study successfully highlights the importance of leadership commitment, its comparative design provides only broad generalizations and offers limited understanding of how ethical leadership influences corruption control within specific national contexts. Moreover, the analysis relied heavily on governance indicators and institutional assessments rather than direct examination of leadership practices. This methodological weakness creates a gap regarding the mechanisms through which ethical leadership shapes anti corruption outcomes. This research contends that corruption control should be understood not only as an institutional challenge but also as a reflection of leadership ethics, values, and accountability orientations.

Beyond accountability and transparency, scholars have increasingly explored the relationship between ethical leadership and public service delivery. Public service delivery represents one of the most visible indicators of governance performance because it directly affects citizens' welfare and quality of life. Van der Wal (2022) investigated ethical leadership and service delivery outcomes within public sector institutions. Using qualitative case studies and policy analysis, the study found that ethical leadership improves administrative responsiveness, resource management, and citizen satisfaction. The study provides valuable insights into how leadership values shape service delivery processes. Nevertheless, the analysis focused largely on administrative institutions and paid insufficient attention to the broader development implications of service delivery. Effective service delivery contributes to sustainable development through improvements in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and social welfare. However, previous studies have rarely examined these

connections systematically. This omission creates an analytical gap that necessitates a broader examination of how ethical leadership contributes to development outcomes through governance processes.

The literature on good governance has evolved considerably over the past decade, particularly within the context of sustainable development. Good governance is commonly defined in terms of accountability, transparency, participation, responsiveness, effectiveness, equity, and adherence to the rule of law (United Nations Development Programme, 2022). Recent scholarship has emphasized that governance quality constitutes a critical determinant of development performance. Grindle (2024) examined governance reforms and development outcomes in developing countries using comparative policy analysis. The study concluded that countries with stronger governance institutions consistently achieve better development outcomes than those characterized by weak accountability systems. While this finding reinforces the importance of governance, the study primarily focuses on institutional arrangements and policy frameworks. Less attention is devoted to the ethical characteristics of leaders responsible for implementing governance reforms. Consequently, governance is often treated as a structural phenomenon rather than a process shaped by leadership values and behaviour. This research challenges that assumption by arguing that governance institutions derive much of their effectiveness from the ethical orientations of those who manage them.

Citizen participation constitutes another important dimension of good governance that has attracted considerable scholarly interest. Gaventa and Barrett (2023) explored participatory governance and development outcomes through comparative analysis of governance initiatives in developing countries. Their findings indicate that citizen participation enhances accountability, strengthens policy legitimacy, and improves service delivery outcomes. The study employed mixed methods involving case studies, surveys, and policy evaluations. Although the findings provide strong evidence regarding the value of participation, the analysis gives limited attention to the role of ethical leadership in creating and sustaining participatory governance structures. Participation is often influenced by leadership willingness to encourage openness, inclusiveness, and dialogue. Without ethical leadership, participatory mechanisms may become ineffective or manipulated for political purposes. This gap highlights the need to integrate ethical leadership into discussions of participatory governance.

The relationship between governance and sustainable development has generated a substantial body of literature. Sustainable development refers to development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (United Nations, 2023). Recent studies increasingly acknowledge that governance quality plays a decisive role in determining whether development policies produce sustainable outcomes. Biermann et al. (2022) examined governance and the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals using global comparative data. Their findings indicate that institutional effectiveness, accountability, and policy coherence significantly influence progress toward sustainable development targets. While the study contributes to understanding the governance dimensions of sustainability, its reliance on global indicators provides limited insight into country specific governance dynamics. Furthermore, ethical leadership receives little attention despite its

potential influence on institutional effectiveness and policy implementation. This omission creates a theoretical gap because sustainable development outcomes often depend on leadership decisions regarding resource allocation, policy priorities, and public accountability.

Within the Nigerian context, governance and development studies have traditionally focused on corruption, institutional weakness, and political instability. Adejuwon (2021) examined governance challenges and development performance in Nigeria using qualitative analysis of policy documents and governance indicators. The study found that weak institutions, corruption, and inadequate accountability mechanisms continue to undermine development efforts. Although the study offers valuable insights into governance deficiencies, it largely treats governance failure as an institutional problem without adequately examining the ethical dimensions of leadership. Consequently, the analysis provides limited understanding of how leadership behaviour contributes to governance outcomes. This omission is important because institutions are ultimately operated by individuals whose ethical orientations influence policy implementation and administrative performance.

Similarly, Ezeani and Oladele (2022) investigated public sector governance and development outcomes in Nigeria using mixed methods. Their findings revealed that governance reforms have produced limited results due to persistent accountability deficits and weak institutional enforcement. The study successfully identifies structural constraints affecting governance performance. However, its focus on institutional reforms overlooks the role of ethical leadership in shaping organizational culture and governance effectiveness. This methodological orientation reflects a broader tendency within Nigerian governance literature to emphasize institutional structures while underestimating leadership behaviour as a determinant of development outcomes. This study seeks to bridge this gap by integrating leadership ethics into the analysis of governance and sustainable development.

Another emerging issue concerns the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Nigeria. Olanrewaju et al. (2023) assessed Nigeria's progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals using policy analysis and development indicators. The study concluded that governance challenges remain a major impediment to achieving sustainable development objectives. While the analysis identifies governance as a critical factor, it does not adequately interrogate the leadership dimensions of governance performance. Governance failures are often attributed to institutional weaknesses without sufficient consideration of the ethical choices and behaviours of public officials. This research contends that sustainable development cannot be fully understood without examining the ethical foundations of governance systems.

Collectively, the reviewed literature demonstrates substantial progress in understanding ethical leadership, governance, and sustainable development. Nevertheless, several important gaps remain. First, existing studies often examine ethical leadership within organizational contexts rather than governance and development contexts. Second, governance studies frequently focus on institutional arrangements while neglecting the ethical characteristics of leaders who influence institutional performance. Third, sustainable development research tends to emphasize policy frameworks and development indicators without adequately incorporating leadership ethics as an explanatory variable. Fourth, Nigerian studies

have concentrated heavily on corruption, governance failure, and institutional reform while providing limited empirical attention to the nexus between ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development.

The position of this study differs from previous scholarship in three fundamental respects. First, ethical leadership is conceptualized not merely as an organizational attribute but as a governance resource capable of shaping accountability, transparency, and institutional effectiveness. Second, good governance is treated not only as an institutional outcome but also as a process influenced by leadership ethics and values. Third, sustainable development is examined as a consequence of the interaction between ethical leadership and governance quality rather than as a product of policy interventions alone. By integrating these dimensions into a single analytical framework, this study seeks to contribute a more comprehensive understanding of how ethical leadership can strengthen governance systems and advance sustainable development in Nigeria.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study demonstrate that ethical leadership constitutes a critical foundation for the realization of good governance and sustainable development in Nigeria. Evidence synthesized from the reviewed literature indicates that leadership characterized by integrity, accountability, transparency, fairness, and commitment to the public interest strengthens governance institutions by improving public confidence, promoting responsible decision making, and enhancing the effectiveness of policy implementation. This finding reinforces the central proposition of Ethical Leadership Theory, which argues that leaders influence institutional behaviour through moral conduct and the consistent demonstration of ethical values (Brown et al., 2005; Brown & Treviño, 2006). Unlike earlier studies that largely examined ethical leadership from organizational and managerial perspectives, this study establishes that ethical leadership extends beyond administrative efficiency to shape governance quality and long term development outcomes within public institutions.

The study further reveals that good governance functions as the principal mechanism through which ethical leadership translates into sustainable development. Previous studies have generally examined governance using institutional indicators such as accountability, transparency, participation, rule of law, and effectiveness (Fukuyama, 2013; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], 2022). While these studies have contributed significantly to governance scholarship, they often conceptualize governance as an institutional arrangement that operates independently of leadership behaviour. The present study departs from this perspective by demonstrating that governance effectiveness is fundamentally dependent upon the ethical orientation of political and administrative leaders who formulate policies, allocate public resources, and supervise implementation processes. Consequently, governance institutions are strengthened not merely through structural reforms but through ethical leadership that institutionalizes integrity, responsibility, and public accountability.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between ethical leadership and accountability within public institutions. Existing studies consistently report that accountability mechanisms improve institutional performance and reduce opportunities for corruption (Miao et al., 2023; Rothstein, 2018). However, many of these studies explain

accountability primarily through institutional controls, regulatory mechanisms, and administrative procedures. The evidence examined in this study indicates that accountability is equally a behavioural outcome that depends on the ethical commitment of leaders to openness, honesty, and responsible stewardship of public resources. This position extends previous scholarship by arguing that formal accountability institutions alone cannot guarantee effective governance where leadership lacks ethical commitment. Ethical leadership therefore emerges as a prerequisite for transforming accountability from a procedural requirement into an institutional culture.

The findings also demonstrate that transparency represents more than an administrative practice of information disclosure. Previous studies have generally measured transparency through legal frameworks, access to public information, and financial reporting systems (Cucciniello et al., 2024). Although these indicators remain important, the present study argues that transparency is fundamentally sustained by ethical leadership. Leaders who consistently uphold honesty and openness create governance environments in which public information is willingly disclosed, procurement processes become more credible, and citizens develop greater confidence in public institutions. This interpretation differs from existing literature by emphasizing that transparency is not solely an institutional product but also an ethical outcome of leadership behaviour.

The study further establishes that ethical leadership significantly influences the effectiveness of public service delivery, which represents an important dimension of sustainable development. Previous empirical studies have associated improvements in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and social welfare with institutional effectiveness and governance reforms (Van der Wal, 2022). However, these studies have paid comparatively less attention to the ethical values guiding leadership decisions regarding resource allocation, policy priorities, and implementation. The present study demonstrates that ethical leadership enhances public service delivery by promoting equitable distribution of resources, reducing administrative inefficiency, and strengthening institutional responsiveness to citizens' needs. Sustainable development therefore depends not only on the existence of development policies but also on ethical leadership capable of ensuring their effective implementation.

Another notable finding concerns the persistent governance challenges confronting Nigeria. The reviewed literature consistently identifies corruption, weak institutions, political patronage, limited accountability, and ineffective public administration as major obstacles to development (Agbiboa, 2020; Khan et al., 2022). While these explanations remain valid, the present study argues that they represent symptoms of a broader leadership challenge. Many previous studies interpret governance failure primarily through structural, institutional, and political economy perspectives, with limited attention given to the ethical foundations of leadership. This study therefore advances the argument that strengthening governance institutions requires parallel investment in ethical leadership capable of promoting integrity, public trust, and responsible governance. Institutional reforms are unlikely to produce sustainable results where ethical leadership remains weak.

The findings equally reveal that the achievement of sustainable development in Nigeria depends upon the integration of ethical leadership principles into governance processes. Earlier studies have generally explained

sustainable development through economic growth, environmental protection, social inclusion, and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (Biermann et al., 2022; United Nations, 2023). Although these dimensions remain important, the evidence synthesized in this study demonstrates that sustainable development is fundamentally a governance outcome shaped by leadership ethics. Development policies are more likely to produce inclusive and lasting benefits where leaders demonstrate accountability, fairness, transparency, and commitment to the public good. Conversely, unethical leadership weakens governance institutions, encourages corruption, undermines policy implementation, and ultimately constrains sustainable development.

The study also identifies an important methodological gap within existing scholarship. Most previous studies examining ethical leadership have relied predominantly on quantitative survey methods conducted within organizational settings, while governance studies have depended largely on governance indices, perception surveys, and institutional indicators. Although these approaches provide valuable empirical evidence, they often fail to capture the complex interaction among leadership values, institutional behaviour, governance effectiveness, and development outcomes. By adopting a qualitative synthesis of current academic literature, this study provides a broader analytical perspective that integrates ethical leadership, governance, and sustainable development within a single conceptual framework. This approach contributes to existing knowledge by explaining the underlying mechanisms through which leadership ethics influence governance and development.

The principal contribution of this study therefore lies in its integration of three concepts that previous studies have frequently examined independently. Rather than treating ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development as separate analytical constructs, this study demonstrates that they are mutually reinforcing dimensions of effective public administration. Ethical leadership strengthens governance through accountability, transparency, integrity, and responsible decision making. Improved governance enhances institutional effectiveness, public participation, and service delivery. These governance outcomes subsequently create conditions necessary for achieving sustainable development. This integrated perspective represents an important departure from earlier studies that focused primarily on isolated relationships among these variables.

Overall, the findings suggest that the pursuit of sustainable development in Nigeria requires greater emphasis on institutionalizing ethical leadership within public governance. Policy reforms that concentrate exclusively on institutional restructuring, regulatory enforcement, or economic planning may achieve only limited success unless accompanied by leadership committed to ethical conduct and public accountability. Consequently, this study advances the position that ethical leadership should be regarded not merely as an individual leadership attribute but as a strategic governance resource capable of transforming public institutions and promoting sustainable national development.

Conclusion

This study examined the relationship among ethical leadership, good governance, and sustainable development in Nigeria through a qualitative analysis of secondary data. The study established that sustainable development is not determined solely by the availability of economic resources, development policies, or

institutional structures, but is fundamentally influenced by the ethical orientation of leadership and the quality of governance. The review of extant literature demonstrated that ethical leadership promotes accountability, transparency, integrity, responsiveness, and responsible stewardship of public resources, all of which strengthen governance institutions and create conditions necessary for sustainable socioeconomic development.

The study further revealed that although previous scholarly works have made significant contributions to understanding ethical leadership, governance, and sustainable development, these concepts have largely been examined independently. Existing studies have predominantly focused on ethical leadership within organizational settings, governance as an institutional phenomenon, or sustainable development as an outcome of economic and policy interventions. Consequently, insufficient scholarly attention has been devoted to explaining the interdependent relationship among ethical leadership, governance quality, and sustainable development, particularly within the Nigerian public sector. This fragmented approach has limited understanding of the mechanisms through which leadership ethics shape governance effectiveness and influence development outcomes.

Drawing on Ethical Leadership Theory, the study argued that leadership ethics constitute the foundation upon which effective governance and sustainable development are built. Ethical leaders establish institutional cultures that promote honesty, fairness, accountability, transparency, and public trust. These leadership values strengthen governance institutions by improving policy implementation, enhancing public service delivery, encouraging citizen participation, and ensuring prudent management of public resources. Where ethical leadership is weak, governance institutions become vulnerable to corruption, administrative inefficiency, poor accountability, and ineffective implementation of development programmes, thereby undermining sustainable development.

The principal contribution of this study lies in its development of an integrated analytical perspective that conceptualizes ethical leadership as the driving force of good governance and good governance as the institutional pathway through which sustainable development is achieved. This perspective extends existing literature by demonstrating that governance reforms and development strategies cannot produce enduring results without leadership committed to ethical principles and responsible public administration. The study therefore shifts scholarly attention from the traditional emphasis on institutional reforms and economic policies to the ethical foundations of governance, thereby offering a more comprehensive explanation of sustainable development in Nigeria.

The study concludes that strengthening ethical leadership should be regarded as a strategic national priority for improving governance performance and achieving sustainable development. Institutional reforms should therefore be accompanied by deliberate efforts to promote ethical values, strengthen accountability systems, reinforce transparency mechanisms, cultivate integrity within public institutions, and encourage leadership that consistently places public interest above personal or political considerations. Such an approach will enhance public confidence in government, improve the effectiveness of governance institutions, and contribute significantly to the realization of sustainable development in Nigeria.

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