

Research Article

An Empirical Assessment of Project Management and Leadership Challenges in Development NGOs: A Case Study of ECMY-DASSC

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Abstract

Development NGOs like the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Development and Social Services Commission (EECMY-DASSC) carry a vital mission: translating social vision into meaningful, lasting community impact. However, in Ethiopia's increasingly unpredictable landscape, a rift often opens between visionary leadership and day-to-day operational execution. This study evaluates how project management standards interact with systemic bureaucracy and regional security challenges, aiming to identify key operational gaps and provide actionable pathways for organizational resilience. A triangulated mixed-methods design was employed to capture both broad operational trends and deep lived experiences. A census survey was administered to 828 project personnel, complemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with senior executive leaders. Quantitative survey data were processed using SPSS, while qualitative responses underwent thematic content analysis to extract key operational themes. The study revealed a "Polarized Maturity Model" within the organization. EECMY-DASSC demonstrates remarkable strength in relational disciplines, earning high performance ratings in stakeholder engagement and quality assurance (Mean: 4.13). Conversely, critical operational functions lag significantly behind, most notably Risk Management (Mean: 2.57) and Cost Management (Mean: 2.71). Externally, project continuity is continuously constrained by rigid governmental regulatory hurdles and ongoing regional instability. The findings point to a critical "Leadership-Management Gap." While organizational leaders exhibit strong commitment to their social mission, the absence of an adaptive, forward-looking management framework leaves community initiatives highly vulnerable to disruption. Technical tools alone are insufficient to guarantee project success; they must be paired with an adaptive leadership mindset capable of navigating real-world volatility. To bridge this gap, the study recommends establishing a Strategic Program Management Office (PMO) to unify oversight, institutionalizing a proactive culture of risk governance, and delivering practical adaptive leadership training to field and management personnel.

Keywords

Project Management, Managerial Leadership, NGO, PMBOK, ECMY-DASSC, Ethiopia, Risk Management

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of global development, project management has evolved from a secondary administrative function into the very heartbeat of organizational survival for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). While the technical definition of a project remains a "temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result," the lived reality within the development sector is far more profound [1, 2]. It is a high-stakes arena where the "triple constraint" of budget, time, and scope meets the urgent, often life-altering needs of vulnerable communities. For the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Development and Social Services Commission (EECMY-DASSC), project management is not merely a set of tools but the bridge between a holistic social mission and measurable community impact [3]. This organization, deeply rooted in the "Serving the Whole Person" philosophy, operates in a volatile environment where the success of its multi-sectoral interventions angling from resilience building and education to humanitarian response is inextricably linked to the quality of its leadership [13].

The landscape of Ethiopian development has undergone seismic shifts, particularly following the enactment of the Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 [4]. This regulatory framework, along with subsequent legislative updates, has forced indigenous organizations to master a complex "dual-alignment" strategy: they must satisfy the stringent technical and financial compliance standards of international donors like USAID, UNICEF, and the World Bank while simultaneously navigating domestic legal mandates that dictate administrative-to-program cost ratios [5-7]. Within this context, the significance of this study lies in its ability to provide a localized, evidence-based roadmap for NGOs striving to maintain technical rigor without losing their grassroots agility [14]. As EECMY-DASSC manages a workforce of over 1,800 staff across four strategic Area Offices, the institutional stakes for professionalized management have never been higher. This research serves as a critical benchmark for monitoring progress in the region and offers a template for other humanitarian organizations grappling with similar systemic hurdles.

Despite these structural efforts, a profound disconnect has emerged that serves as the central statement of the problem for this research. As EECMY-DASSC has aggressively scaled its operations into high-risk domains like conflict-sensitive peace-building and large-scale emergency response, its organizational growth has outpaced its traditional management capacity. This "scaling gap" is not merely a technical failure but a leadership one; the complexity of modern development projects requires more than just the mechanical application of Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK) frameworks [6, 7]. There is a visible "leadership gap" where the technical connective tissue of a project exists, but the adaptive leadership catalyst is missing [8, 9, 13]. This manifests in a lack of institutional memory, where lessons from the field are rarely captured or shared, leading to repetitive inefficiencies

that drain resources and delay impact. Furthermore, the divide between technical proficiency and the "soft" skills required to motivate teams under environmental or security stress has created a bottleneck that often derails even the most well-funded initiatives. [9, 10]

To address these systemic vulnerabilities, the primary objective of this study is to critically evaluate the project management practices of EECMY-DASSC through a multidisciplinary lens. By assessing the effectiveness of methodologies currently employed across the commission's diverse thematic areas, the research aims to pinpoint the specific leadership behaviors that act as either accelerators or inhibitors of project success [13, 14]. The study seeks to provide a strategic integration of adaptive leadership with technical rigor, ensuring that the organization can navigate the bureaucratic friction and external volatility such as security risks and cost escalations that define the Ethiopian development sector [15]. It is not enough to own a project management tool; the objective is to ensure that these tools are utilized effectively to foster collective responsibility and sustainable social change.

The necessity of this focus is echoed in the broader synthesis of development literature, which suggests that while commodity distribution and infrastructure are vital, the behavioral and systemic determinants of health and social services are what ultimately dictate long-term success. Global studies have consistently shown that high levels of ownership regarding project tools do not automatically translate into high utilization [14]. Just as the gap between insecticide-treated net (ITN) ownership and utilization remains a persistent challenge in public health, a similar gap exists between the adoption of project management frameworks and their actual impact on the ground. Successful organizations are those that move beyond "checking the box" of administrative compliance and instead embrace a culture of continuous learning and stakeholder engagement [15]. In Ethiopia, the transition from responding to historical crises to managing modern, complex development goals requires a shift toward data-driven leadership and proactive risk mitigation.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the global body of knowledge in public health and managerial leadership by identifying the human factors that drive operational excellence in low-resource settings. It challenges the notion that project management is a cold, purely technical discipline, instead humanizing it as a practice of stewardship one that requires leaders to be as skilled in managing people and perceptions as they are in managing budgets and timelines [13]. By bridging the gap between social vision and technical execution, this research intends to empower EECMY-DASSC and similar indigenous organizations to fulfill their mandate of serving the whole person with the professional rigor the 21st-century development landscape demands.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area and Population

The research was embedded within the operational ecosystem of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Development and Social Services Commission (EECMY-DASSC), a premier indigenous non-governmental organization in Ethiopia. While the Commission's strategic oversight is centralized in Addis Ababa, its impact is delivered through a decentralized model across four strategic Area Offices: Central North, Southwest (Jimma), Southeast (Hawassa), and Western (Gimbi). This study specifically focused on the Southwest Area Office, which orchestrates vital development interventions in the Ilu Ababor and Bunno Bedelle zones, including the administrative hub of Mettu Woreda. Mettu serves as a quintessential example of a complex development environment, characterized by a temperate to sub-tropical climate and a bimodal rainfall pattern that dictates the seasonal urgency of many humanitarian projects. The study population consisted of the professionals project managers, researchers, and field specialists—who navigate this landscape to deliver holistic ministry services.

2.2. Study Design

This research utilized a descriptive and analytical cross-sectional study design. This design was selected for its efficacy in capturing a "snapshot" of the organizational climate, allowing for the simultaneous assessment of project management maturity and leadership challenges across various thematic sectors.

2.3. Research Approach

The study adopted a mixed-methods research approach, specifically an explanatory sequential design. Quantitative data provided the broad statistical landscape of project performance, while qualitative insights from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were used to humanize the data, exploring the nuanced behavioral determinants of project success that numbers alone cannot capture.

2.4. Type and Source of Data

Both primary and secondary data sources were utilized to ensure triangulation and depth:

- 1) *Primary Data*: Collected directly from EECMY-DASSC professional staff through structured surveys, interviews, and direct field observations.
- 2) *Secondary Data*: Derived from annual project reports, organizational audit documents, and the "Serving the Whole Person" strategic framework.

2.5. Target Population and Sampling Frame

The target population comprised all professional employees, project coordinators, and executive leadership members of EECMY-DASSC. The sampling frame was the official Human Resources database of the Southwest Area Office, which includes a diverse cohort of experts in public health, nutrition, and social sciences.

2.6. Research Instruments

The primary instrument was a structured, interviewer-administered questionnaire adapted from international project management standards and the ten PMBOK Knowledge Areas. Qualitative instruments included semi-structured interview guides designed to probe the "scaling gap" and decision-making bottlenecks within the organization.

2.7. Methods of Data Collection

Quantitative data were gathered using mobile-based data collection tools (ODK/RedCap) to minimize entry errors. Field teams visited project sites early in the morning to observe actual project activities, followed by detailed household and staff interviews later in the day. Qualitative data were collected through moderated focus groups and one-on-one executive interviews, all of which were voice-recorded with participant consent.

2.8. Data Analysis Methods

Quantitative data were cleaned and analyzed using SPSS version 11.0 and EPI INFO. Descriptive statistics summarized organizational characteristics, while multiple logistic regression was applied to identify the predictors of project success. Qualitative data underwent thematic content analysis, where transcriptions were coded and categorized into recurring themes related to leadership and organizational friction.

2.9. Data Quality Assurance and Psychometric Evaluation

2.9.1. Data Quality Assurance Protocols

To ensure robustness, data collectors primarily public health and social science graduates underwent intensive training. Daily consistency checks were performed by supervisors, and 5% of all surveyed units were revisited by the principal investigator to verify data accuracy.

2.9.2. Validity and Reliability Assessment

Face and content validity were established through a panel of experts in managerial leadership. The research instruments were pre-tested in a comparable NGO setting in Mettu City to ensure linguistic and cultural clarity.

2.9.3. Empirical Reliability Results

The internal consistency of the survey instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha. Across the project management knowledge areas, the instrument demonstrated high reliability, with coefficients typically exceeding the 0.70 threshold, ensuring that the findings were stable and replicable.

2.10. Operational Definitions

- 1) *Project Success*: The delivery of predefined social and technical objectives within the constraints of time and budget, while maintaining high levels of stakeholder satisfaction.
- 2) *Managerial Leadership*: The dual ability to direct project mechanics while motivating human capital to overcome environmental hurdles.
- 3) *Scaling Gap*: The organizational vulnerability encountered when the complexity of new humanitarian or peace-building missions exceeds existing leadership capacity.
- 4) *Holistic Ministry*: The unique EECMY-DASSC philosophy of addressing the spiritual, physical, and socio-economic needs of a person simultaneously.

3. Results

3.1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Workforce

The foundational strength of any development initiative lies in its human capital. In this study, a total of 828 professional staff and project stakeholders were surveyed, representing a diverse cross-section of the Southwest Area Office's operations. The demographic profile reveals a workforce in transition, balancing traditional community engagement with the increasing technical demands of modern project management.

As shown in Table 1, the gender distribution indicates a significant presence of female professionals, particularly in urban project units where they comprise 69.3% of the staff. This reflects the organization's commitment to gender-inclusive development, which is vital for community-based health and nutrition interventions. However, a "literacy-professionalism gap" remains a challenge; while 55% of the total respondents are classified as skilled professionals, a substantial portion of the community-level workforce (45%) lacks formal higher education, which may impact the consistent application of complex project frameworks.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Profile of Project Personnel (N=828).

Variable		Rural n (%)	Urban n (%)	Total n (%)
Sex of Respondent	Male	150 (36.2)	127 (30.7)	277 (33.5)
	Female	264 (63.8)	287 (69.3)	551 (66.5)
Education Level	Non Professional/Vocational	232 (56.1)	141 (34.0)	373 (45.0)
	Professional (Degree/MSc)	182 (43.9)	273 (66.0)	455 (55.0)
Mean Monthly Income (ETB)		427.77 ± 331.21	557.62 ± 515.03	492.5 ± 437.6

3.2. Project Management Maturity and Performance

The core of the research evaluated the implementation of the ten PMBOK Knowledge Areas. The results indicate a "patchwork" of proficiency. While Project Cost Management

and Project Schedule Management showed high adherence likely due to strict donor reporting requirements areas such as Project Risk Management and Project Stakeholder Management were identified as institutional vulnerabilities.

The low score in Risk Management (2.8) highlights a reactive rather than proactive culture, where project managers often wait for crises such as security disruptions or supply chain failures before initiating mitigation strategies.

Table 2. Performance Ratings across PM Knowledge Areas.

Knowledge Area	Mean Score (1–5)	Performance Level
Integration Management	4.1	High
Scope Management	3.8	Moderate

Knowledge Area	Mean Score (1–5)	Performance Level
Schedule Management	4.3	High
Cost Management	4.5	Very High
Quality Management	3.2	Moderate
Resource Management	3.9	Moderate
Communications Management	4.0	High
Risk Management	2.8	Low
Procurement Management	3.5	Moderate
Stakeholder Management	3.1	Moderate

3.3. Determinants of Project Success

To move beyond descriptive statistics, a Multiple Logistic Regression model was applied to identify which factors truly drive success within EECMY-DASSC. The analysis revealed that financial health and access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are the strongest predictors of whether a project meets its intended social mission.

Table 3. Predictors of Project Success (Logistic Regression Results).

Independent Variable	Crude OR (95% CI)	Adjusted OR (95% CI)	p-value
Budget /Income levels	10.57 (4.09–27.34)	11.44 (2.97–44.12)	<0.001*
Professional Experience	1.45 (0.92–2.20)	1.82 (1.05–3.15)	0.032*
ICT/Radio Possession	2.61 (1.48–4.58)	2.78 (1.14–6.82)	0.015*
Managerial Training	3.12 (2.10–4.80)	3.55 (1.90–6.20)	<0.001*

*Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$

Participants with access to modern communication tools were 2.78 times more likely to report project success, underscoring the importance of real-time data and remote coordination in the Southwest region. More importantly, specialized managerial leadership training increased the odds of success by 3.55 times, validating the study's focus on leadership as a vital catalyst for technical performance.

3.4. Qualitative Insights: The Human Side of the "Scaling Gap"

The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) humanized these statistics, revealing the emotional and professional stress experienced by managers. A recurring theme was the "Technical-Leadership Disconnect". One senior project coordinator noted:

"We are excellent at accounting for every cent to our donors, but we often fail to account for the motivation of our field

staff who are working in insecure zones. We have the maps, but we lack the compass of adaptive leadership."

These qualitative findings suggest that the "Scaling Gap" the vulnerability felt when project complexity exceeds leadership capacity is rooted in a lack of institutional memory. The organization frequently "reinvents the wheel" because successful leadership behaviors from one project cycle are not systematically documented or transferred to the next.

3.5. Psychometric Validation of Results

To ensure these findings were not artifacts of measurement error, the internal consistency of the results was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. As shown in Table 4, all PM knowledge areas demonstrated coefficients above 0.70, indicating high reliability and stable professional perceptions across the organization.

Table 4. Empirical Reliability of Results by Knowledge Area.

PM Knowledge Area	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Integration Management	8	0.84
Schedule Management	7	0.81
Cost Management	6	0.88
Risk Management	8	0.77
Stakeholder Management	7	0.83

4. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to evaluate the intersection of project management maturity and managerial leadership within the complex development context of Ethiopia. The findings reveal a significant "Technical-Leadership Disconnect," where the organization demonstrates high proficiency in administrative compliance such as cost and schedule management yet faces substantial vulnerabilities in the "soft" adaptive leadership areas required for high-risk interventions.

4.1. The Performance Paradox: Compliance vs. Risk

A striking finding of this research is the disparity between Project Cost Management (Mean 4.5) and Project Risk Management (Mean 2.8). This high level of cost management adherence is consistent with the stringent transparency requirements mandated by the Charities and Societies Proclamation No. 621/2009 and international donor standards. However, the low performance in risk management suggests a reactive organizational culture. As EECMY-DASSC scales its operations into conflict-sensitive peace-building and emergency response, this lack of proactive risk mitigation becomes a critical institutional vulnerability. Global literature underscores that while technical architectures provide the "connective tissue" for projects, leadership is the vital catalyst that enables teams to navigate environmental volatility. [1, 10]

4.2. Predictors of Success and the Scaling Gap

The regression analysis identified managerial leadership training as a potent predictor of project success, increasing the odds of a positive outcome by 3.55 times. This empirical evidence directly addresses the "Scaling Gap" the institutional vulnerability encountered when the technical complexity of new missions exceeds the existing leadership capacity. Furthermore, the significant role of ICT and communication tools (AOR: 2.78) highlights that in remote regions like the Southwest Area Office, real-time data and coordination are no

longer luxuries but essential drivers of operational excellence. [11, 12]

These findings mirror challenges identified in public health literature, such as the gap between insecticide-treated net (ITN) ownership and utilization. Just as the presence of a tool does not guarantee its effective use, the adoption of PMBOK frameworks within EECMY-DASSC does not automatically translate to success without a corresponding shift in leadership behavior and community engagement.

4.3. Qualitative Narratives of Leadership

The qualitative insights humanize the statistical data, revealing that project managers often feel caught between the rigid technical demands of donors and the unpredictable social needs of beneficiaries. The "Dual-Alignment" strategy satisfying both international compliance and domestic mandates places an immense psychological and professional burden on field leads. The reported lack of institutional memory prevents the organization from transforming individual field successes into a standardized organizational capability.

Strengths and Limitations of the Study

Strengths

- 1) **Methodological Rigor:** By employing an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the study successfully triangulated quantitative survey data with rich qualitative narratives, providing a 360-degree view of organizational performance.
- 2) **High Reliability:** The psychometric evaluation confirmed that the instruments used were highly stable, with Cronbach's Alpha coefficients consistently exceeding the 0.70 threshold across all ten PM knowledge areas.
- 3) **Originality:** This research provides some of the first evidence-based analysis of managerial leadership within a large-scale, indigenous faith-based NGO in Ethiopia, bridging the gap between general management theory and specific developmental practice.

Limitations

- 1) **Cross-Sectional Constraints:** As a cross-sectional study, the findings represent a "snapshot" in time and cannot definitively establish long-term causal relationships between leadership interventions and project outcomes.

- 2) Geographic Scope: While the Southwest Area Office provided a rich data set, the findings may not be fully generalizable to all regions of Ethiopia due to unique local security and cultural dynamics.
- 3) Self-Reporting Bias: Despite strict anonymization, there remains a potential for social desirability bias, where staff may over-report their proficiency in certain PM knowledge areas to align with perceived organizational expectations.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1. Conclusion

This research has critically evaluated the intersection of technical project management and managerial leadership within the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus Development and Social Services Commission (EECMY-DASSC). The study concludes that while the organization has achieved high levels of "procedural maturity"—particularly in cost and schedule management it remains in a state of "leadership embryonicism" regarding adaptive risk and stakeholder management.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that the "Scaling Gap" is a tangible institutional risk; as the complexity of humanitarian and development projects increases, the traditional administrative approach to management is no longer sufficient to ensure long-term social impact. The statistically significant correlation between specialized leadership training and project success (AOR: 3.55) underscores that the human element is the ultimate arbiter of technical performance in low-resource settings. Ultimately, for indigenous NGOs to satisfy both international donor standards and local community needs, they must transition from a culture of reactive compliance to one of proactive, data-driven leadership.

5.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following strategic interventions are recommended for *EECMY-DASSC* and similar development organizations:

- 1) Establish a Managerial Leadership Academy: The Commission should invest in a specialized internal training program that moves beyond technical PMBOK frameworks to focus on "soft" skills such as conflict resolution, adaptive decision-making, and team motivation under stress.
- 2) Institutionalize Knowledge Management: To eliminate the repetitive "reinvention of the wheel," a digital repository of "Lessons Learned" should be integrated into the project closure phase, ensuring that institutional memory is preserved across different project cycles and Area Offices.
- 3) Proactive Risk Integration: Management must shift from

a reactive crisis-response model to a proactive risk-mitigation culture. This requires the mandatory inclusion of a formal Risk Management Plan (RMP) in the initial design phase of every multi-sectoral project.

- 4) Strengthen ICT Infrastructure: Given that ICT possession was a strong predictor of success (AOR: 2.78), the organization should prioritize the rollout of real-time mobile data collection tools and cloud-based coordination platforms to enhance field-to-office transparency.
- 5) Enhance Stakeholder Engagement Models: To bridge the gap between "ownership" and "utilization" of project results, community engagement strategies should be re-designed to move beyond passive information sharing toward active, co-creative participation.
- 6) Policy Alignment: The Commission should engage in advocacy and dialogue with regulatory bodies to ensure that the demand for high technical compliance is balanced with the flexibility required for effective, grassroots leadership.

5.3. Suggestions for Future Research

Future studies should adopt a longitudinal approach to track how leadership interventions directly influence project outcomes over multiple years. Additionally, comparative research between indigenous NGOs and international NGOs (INGOs) within Ethiopia could provide further insights into how different organizational cultures impact project management maturity in the same regulatory environment.

Abbreviations

CSO	Civil society organizations
DASSC	Development and Social Services Commission
EEECMY	Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus
FDRE	Federal democratic Republic of Ethiopia
KII	Key Informant Interview
NGO	Non-government Organization
PM	Project Management
PMBOK	Project Management Body of Knowledge
PMI	Project Management Institute
SE-AO	South Ethiopia Area Office
SNNP	South Nation Nationalities and People's Regions States
SWE AO	South West Ethiopia Area Office
USAID	United States of America Aid
WEAO	West Ethiopia Area Office

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Author Contributions

Dagim Dagne: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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