

Exploring Servant Leadership Model at the Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC): Practices, Challenges, and Strategies for Sustaining the Model

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Abstract

This article examines the application, challenges, and strategies for sustaining the servant leadership model at the Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Drawing on Greenleaf's servant-leadership philosophy and Spears' ten characteristics of servant leadership, the study employs a qualitative case study approach based primarily on secondary literature and institutional information. The analysis situates UCBC's leadership practices within the broader historical, cultural, economic, and institutional realities of the DRC. The analysis indicates that UCBC has intentionally integrated servant leadership into its institutional vision, mission, core values, educational model, and organizational practices. Practices such as listening, empathy, healing, participatory decision-making, stewardship, mentoring, staff development, service-learning, and community building demonstrate the institutionalization of servant-leadership principles. However, the sustainability of this model is challenged by hierarchical leadership traditions, relational networks that may encourage favoritism, communication gaps, inconsistent accountability, resource constraints, organizational growth, and the realities of operating in a conflict-affected environment. At the same time, communal values associated with Ubuntu and UCBC's principle of Tuko Pamoja provide a culturally relevant foundation for servant leadership. The article proposes strategies including leadership development, transparent communication, equitable accountability, sustainable human-resource and financial stewardship, succession planning, staff well-being, and organizational learning. The study concludes that sustaining servant leadership at UCBC requires alignment between relational values, institutional systems, accountability, and adaptive capacity.

Keywords

Servant Leadership, Organizational Culture, Ubuntu,
Christian Bilingual University of Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo

1. Introduction

“The servant-leader is servant first” (Greenleaf, 1977: p. 6). This seemingly paradoxical statement challenges the conventional understanding of leadership as the exercise of authority, control, and personal advancement. Instead, servant leadership begins with a commitment to serve others and seeks to ensure that those being served grow in wisdom, freedom, capacity, and well-being. In organizational settings, this philosophy is expressed through practices such as listening, empathy, humility, empowerment, stewardship, participatory decision-making, commitment to followers’ development, and community building (Spears, 2004; van Dierendonck, 2011). Such practices are increasingly associated with organizational benefits, including greater trust, organizational commitment, employee performance, and positive workplace relationships (Setyaningrum et al., 2020; Lu et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the application of servant leadership cannot be separated from its organizational and national context. Organizational cultures characterized by hierarchical authority, limited participation, weak communication, resource constraints, and resistance to change may make servant-leadership difficult to institutionalize and produce expected organizational outcomes. At the national level, historical legacies, political instability, socioeconomic inequalities, corruption, and weak governance can further shape how leadership is understood and practiced. These contextual considerations are particularly significant in Africa, where scholars have argued for leadership approaches that engage African communal values and respond to the continent’s distinctive social and cultural realities (Ezeorah, 2023; Nantamu et al., 2025). Indeed, servant leadership has potential resonance with Ubuntu, an African philosophy emphasizing interconnectedness, human dignity, mutual responsibility, and communal well-being (Asiimwe & Kwani, 2025).

The leadership challenge is especially pressing in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where decades of conflict, authoritarian practices, institutional weaknesses, and corruption have undermined effective governance and human development. Recent analyses describe corruption as deeply embedded in the country’s political economy, while weaknesses in transparency, accountability, institutional coordination, and checks and balances continue to constrain effective governance (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2021; Rahmé & Walsh, 2022). Such conditions underscore the need for leaders or institutions that place collective welfare above personal interests and exercise authority as stewardship rather than domination.

It is within this challenging context that the Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC), located in Beni, North Kivu, emerges as an important educational response and a model of transformation. Hence, its motto: “being transformed to transform” (Asobee & Gemechu, 2022). Established in 2007 and chartered in 2010, UCBC seeks to form Congolese leaders through bilingual, Christian, and holistic education, combining academic learning, service-learning, and work-based formation. Its vision of a DRC in which every life counts and human potential is released for the creation of prosperous and just communities reflects an explicit commitment to leadership formation and social transformation (Asiimwe & Kwani, 2025). Therefore, this paper aims to examine the application of servant leadership at UCBC, identify potential challenges arising from organizational and national contexts, and propose strategies for sustaining the model and strengthening the institution’s capacity to fulfil its mission.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Colonial Inheritance and the Legacy of Top-Down Leadership

Understanding leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) requires attention to the historical institutions through which authority was constructed. Colonial rule did not simply reorganize political administration; it reshaped understandings of power, ethnicity, territory, and legitimate authority. In eastern DRC, for example, colonial authorities institutionalized particular understandings of ethnicity and territory that have continued to influence postcolonial political identities and struggles (Hoffmann, 2019). Colonial administration also relied on hierarchical and coercive forms of authority, creating institutional patterns in which leaders were positioned as rulers over subjects rather than as stewards accountable to citizens.

This historical inheritance creates an important tension for servant leadership. Servant leadership emphasizes humility, empowerment, listening, participation, and the prioritization of followers’ welfare (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011). Yet, where leadership has historically been associated with status, privilege, command, and access to resources, serving others may be interpreted as weakness rather than effective leadership. Recent research on servant leadership in the DRC similarly argues that colonial experiences contributed to an enduring perception of leadership as superiority and social stratification (Asiimwe & Kwani, 2025). Thus, servant leadership in the DRC involves not merely adopting a new leadership technique but challenging historically embedded assumptions about what it means to possess authority.

2.2. National Culture from Hofstede’s Framework

Hofstede’s framework emphasizes dimensions such as power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation (Hofstede, 2001). The Democratic Republic of Congo’s leadership challenges can be examined through cultural dimensions as described by Hofstede. High power

distance may normalize unequal distribution of authority, encouraging leaders to make decisions unilaterally and discouraging subordinates from questioning those in positions of power (Hofstede, 2001). This can conflict with servant leadership, which emphasizes participation, empowerment, listening, and shared decision-making (van Dierendonck, 2011).

The country's collectivist orientation can promote solidarity, loyalty, and community responsibility, values that potentially complement servant leadership. However, when loyalty is directed primarily toward family, ethnic groups, or personal networks, collectivism can contribute to favoritism, nepotism, and patronage (House et al., 2004). Low uncertainty avoidance may facilitate adaptability in an unstable environment but may also reduce reliance on formal rules, procedures, and institutional controls. Masculinity, when expressed through strong competition, status, and achievement, can encourage authoritative rather than caring leadership and may marginalize relational and compassionate approaches. Finally, long-term orientation can encourage perseverance and investment in future development, but immediate socioeconomic pressures may make long-term institutional transformation difficult.

2.3. Economic Crisis and Resource Constraints

Economic conditions constitute another significant challenge. The DRC possesses enormous natural resources, yet poverty remains widespread. World Bank estimates indicate that approximately 56.2% of the population lived below the national poverty line in the latest national survey, while poverty measured at the international \$3-per-day threshold was estimated at 85.3% in 2020 (World Bank, 2025). The country's mining-centered economic structure has generated substantial growth without sufficiently broad employment and welfare gains.

Poverty and economic insecurity can influence leadership behavior in contradictory ways. On one hand, socioeconomic vulnerability increases the need for servant leaders who prioritize human dignity, development, and equitable access to resources. On the other hand, scarcity can strengthen patron-client relationships, dependency, and competition for access to limited opportunities. Leaders may consequently be pressured to distribute benefits according to personal, familial, or political relationships rather than transparent organizational criteria. Servant leadership therefore faces the challenge of demonstrating that service is compatible with accountability, merit, sustainability, and institutional fairness.

2.4. Weak Governance, Corruption, and Institutional Fragility

An IMF assessment identified institutional complexity, weak transparency, inadequate checks and balances, weaknesses in public financial management, and deficiencies in judicial capacity as major governance problems in the DRC (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2021). These conditions create incentives for leaders to prioritize personal survival and organizational power rather than stewardship and accountability. Corruption presents a particularly direct challenge.

Where institutional controls are weak, individual leaders who attempt to practice servant leadership may face pressure to conform to established expectations of reciprocity, political loyalty, or resource distribution. Servant leadership therefore cannot depend solely on leaders' personal virtues; it requires institutional systems—transparent recruitment, accountability mechanisms, participatory decision-making, ethical codes, and effective oversight—that reinforce servant-oriented behavior.

2.5. Implications for Servant Leadership in the DRC

The literature suggests that the DRC presents both obstacles and opportunities for servant leadership. Colonial and postcolonial experiences have reinforced hierarchical and sometimes self-protective leadership patterns, while poverty, patronage, ethnic competition, corruption, and institutional fragility can undermine service-oriented leadership. Nevertheless, African communal traditions, Ubuntu, humane orientation, collectivism, and strong relational bonds provide important cultural resources for servant leadership (Wanasika et al., 2011). The central challenge, therefore, is not whether servant leadership is culturally compatible with the DRC, but how communal and relational values can be redirected from narrow patronage toward inclusive service, empowerment, accountability, and institutional transformation. This perspective provides a useful foundation for examining the application of servant leadership within real institutional contexts such as UCBC, identifying the potential challenges arising from organizational and national contextual factors, and exploring strategies that institutions operating in such environments can adopt to sustain a culture of servant leadership and enhance organizational outcomes.

3. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study approach (Creswell & Poth, 2025) to examine the application, challenges, and sustainability of servant leadership at the Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). UCBC was selected as a single organizational case because servant leadership is closely connected to the historical, cultural, economic, and institutional context in which the university operates. The study relied primarily on secondary data, including peer-reviewed literature on servant leadership, African leadership, Ubuntu, organizational culture, and the DRC's social and institutional context. Institutional information concerning UCBC's vision, mission, core values, educational model, organizational culture and structure, and leadership practices was also examined. Reports from institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were used to provide additional contextual information on poverty, governance, corruption, and institutional fragility.

Data were analyzed thematically using Greenleaf's servant-leadership philosophy (Greenleaf (1977) and Spears' ten characteristics (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018) as the primary analytical framework. The analysis examined how these

characteristics are reflected in UCBC's practices and identified organizational and national factors that may facilitate or constrain their institutionalization. The study then synthesized these findings to propose strategies for strengthening and sustaining servant leadership at UCBC.

Because the study is based primarily on secondary sources, its findings are interpretive rather than statistically generalizable. However, other learning institutions can draw valuable lessons from UCBC's experience as they reflect on their own leadership and organizational development. Future research could use interviews, surveys, and observations to empirically evaluate servant leadership at UCBC.

4. Practices of Servant Leadership at UCBC

4.1. The Concept of Servant Leadership

It is confirmed by research that Greenleaf first coined the term servant leadership in 1970 (Patterson, 2003). The term was subsequently developed by several scholars who further expanded the concept. The most frequently cited description of servant leadership, which reveals both its philosophical and practical foundations, is probably Greenleaf's (1977) definition of a servant leader: "The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first" (p. 6).

In this definition, Greenleaf distinguishes between the servant first, who is intrinsically motivated to lead through service, and the leader first, whose motivation for leadership is primarily extrinsic to acquire material possessions and social status.

In 1992, Larry Spears—described by Blanchard and Broadwell (2018) as the best student of Greenleaf's writings and former Director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership—identified ten key characteristics of servant leadership from Greenleaf's work. These characteristics are reflected in the behaviors of servant leaders and can also be manifested in the culture of servant-led organizations (Laub, 2005). The ten characteristics include listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. Before describing the application of servant leadership at UCBC following Spears' framework, the next section provides a brief overview of the organization.

4.2. Organizational Overview

4.2.1. Vision, Mission, and Values

The Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC) envisions a Democratic Republic of Congo where every life matters and the human potential is unleashed to create just and thriving communities. The vision emerged in the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), an area affected by decades of political instability, economic fragility, humanitarian crises, and poor leadership.

Cognizant of the multidimensional crisis affecting Congolese society, UCBC offers a unique model of higher education that integrates faith and learning, promotes holistic leadership development, and emphasizes a triadic training curriculum consisting of academic excellence, work program, and service-learning.

Through its integrated education model (Kwany & Higgs, 2016), which seeks to impact the head, heart, and hands, the institution's mission is to educate and equip change-makers while modeling transformation through the holistic renewal of communities and the promotion of systemic justice in the Republic of the Congo (Kwany & Higgs, 2017).

At UCBC, life and leadership are deeply shaped by the institution's seven core values: God First, Open Communication, Transformational Community, Servant Leadership, Teamwork, Holistic Education, and Tuko Pamoja (a Swahili phrase meaning "Together we are"). Consequently, leadership is perceived not as a position of authority but as a form of service. Humility is valued above hierarchy, and collective well-being is prioritized over individual interests. Power is meant to empower others not for personal pride.

The core organizational values are evident in everyday interactions. During a mentoring session, a new student remarked that what she appreciated most about UCBC was the humility of the faculty and the respect they showed toward students. This is in contrast with many universities in the country, where professors are often treated as superior figures and students as subordinates. Similarly, during a graduation ceremony—the university's most prestigious academic event—Rev. Dr. Honore Bunduki Kwany, the current Rector, dressed in ceremonial regalia, personally washed the hands of guests before they entered the dining hall. This sincere act reflected the institution's value of servant leadership.

4.2.2. Sector, Size, and Structure

UCBC is a private, faith-based institution of higher education located in the town of Beni in the eastern DRC. Asobee and Gemechu (2022) note that UCBC was founded in 2007 and received its charter from the Congolese government in 2010. Therefore, the institution operates within the higher education sector under the oversight of the Ministry of Higher and University Education in the DRC.

UCBC has experienced significant growth in both size and organizational structure. At its inception in 2007, the university was established as the flagship program of the Congo Initiative, the organization that founded it. Although exact figures regarding faculty and staff are unavailable, the institution was relatively small, employing fewer than 50 people and operating with a simple organizational structure consisting of the General Assembly, the Management Committee, various divisions, schools, and departments.

Nearly two decades later, the institution's structure has become considerably more complex, incorporating a variety of community engagement initiatives that address some of the most pressing challenges facing the region. Each of these initiatives is linked to one of the university's seven schools including Theology, Leadership and Applied Ethics, Psychology and Education, Communication, Econom-

ics, Law, and Technology and Engineering. These initiatives provide students with opportunities to engage through service-learning, research, and internships. At the same time, the number of employees has nearly tripled, reflecting the institution's continued growth and expanding impact.

4.2.3. Application of Servant Leadership at UCBC

In their recent article, [Asiimwe and Kwani \(2025\)](#) analyzed the development of servant leadership in the DRC through the educational model of UCBC. The authors examined the implementation of servant leadership at UCBC based on Greenleaf's foundational philosophy and Spears' ten characteristics of servant leadership. Their analysis demonstrates that UCBC provides a compelling case of servant leadership in practice. The ten characteristics can be summarized as follows:

1. **Listening:** UCBC promotes active listening through family talks, staff retreats, general education courses, and formal and informal interactions, creating opportunities for students and staff to express their perspectives and concerns.

2. **Empathy:** The university encourages members to understand and respond to one another's emotional, physical, and social experiences. Small groups, community support during significant life events, and the work program foster solidarity and identification with others.

3. **Healing:** Recognizing the psychological effects of conflict, UCBC provides counseling, debriefing, chapel services, spiritual retreats, and chaplaincy support to promote emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being.

4. **Awareness:** Through self- and peer-assessment, group projects, and service-learning activities, UCBC helps students and staff understand their strengths, weaknesses, identities, and influence on others, facilitating effective collaboration and conflict prevention.

5. **Persuasion:** UCBC emphasizes participatory rather than coercive decision-making. Family talks, student representation in disciplinary and management processes, and collaboration with staff representatives provide opportunities for stakeholders to contribute to decisions.

6. **Conceptualization:** Leaders continually connect daily activities to UCBC's broader vision, mission, and values, enabling members to understand their responsibilities within the institution's long-term purpose.

7. **Foresight:** UCBC encourages learning from past experiences and mistakes to anticipate future challenges. This orientation is particularly important in an unstable environment where leaders must prepare the institution for uncertainty and adversity.

8. **Stewardship:** UCBC promotes responsible management of institutional resources for the common good. Stewardship is integrated into student formation, project implementation, and alumni engagement, emphasizing integrity, accountability, and service rather than personal gain.

9. **Commitment to the Growth of People:** The university invests in the academic and professional development of its staff through postgraduate study opportunities, faculty development, capacity building, and opportunities for alumni to re-

turn to the institution.

10. Building Community: UCBC intentionally cultivates a transformational community through monthly reflection days, weekly small groups, mentoring, fellowship, and mutual support. These practices strengthen belonging and provide an important support system within a conflict-affected environment.

Taken together, these practices indicate that servant leadership at UCBC is not limited to individual leadership behaviors but is embedded in organizational culture. This makes UCBC a significant case for examining how servant leadership can be contextualized and sustained within the complex social, cultural, and institutional realities of the DRC.

5. Challenges of Applying Servant Leadership at UCBC

The literature on servant leadership in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) suggests that UCBC operates within a context that both supports and constrains the institutionalization of servant leadership. Although UCBC has intentionally embedded servant leadership in its vision, mission, values, educational model, and everyday practices, the sustainability of these practices may be challenged by the historical, cultural, economic, and institutional conditions in which the university operates. The challenges are particularly significant because servant leadership requires not only individual commitment but also organizational structures and social norms that support humility, participation, empowerment, accountability, and concern for the welfare and development of others. Thus, the central issue for UCBC is not simply whether servant leadership is practiced, but whether its values can be consistently embedded in the organizational behavior, culture, structures, systems, in order to produce expected results.

First, hierarchical leadership traditions may challenge the institutionalization of servant leadership. Colonial administration in the DRC contributed to hierarchical and coercive understandings of authority, while ethnic and territorial classifications created enduring effects on political and social identities (Hoffmann, 2019). Such historical patterns can encourage the perception that leaders should occupy positions of superiority and that subordinates should demonstrate deference. Asimwe and Kwani (2025) similarly identify authoritarian leadership legacies as an important contextual challenge to the development of servant leadership in the DRC. Although UCBC deliberately challenges this pattern through humility, student participation, listening, and symbolic acts of service, leaders may still experience pressure to exercise authority in conventional ways. Consequently, practices such as persuasion and empowerment may sometimes be interpreted as a lack of decisiveness rather than as effective leadership.

Second, cultural expectations concerning hierarchy, loyalty, and relationships may create tensions between servant leadership and organizational fairness. Collectivist and communal orientations can support servant leadership because they emphasize solidarity, relational responsibility, and concern for others. Ubuntu, for example, provides a cultural resource that is compatible with humane-oriented

and relational leadership (Wanasika et al., 2011). However, strong relational networks can also encourage favoritism, patronage, and preferential treatment when loyalty to family, friends, ethnic groups, or personal networks becomes more important than organizational criteria (House et al., 2004). For UCBC, therefore, the challenge is to preserve the relational strengths of Tuko Pamoja (“Together we are”) while ensuring that relationships do not undermine merit, equity, transparency, and accountability.

Third, inconsistent communication may undermine listening, trust, and participation. UCBC has established family talks, retreats, small groups, and other mechanisms for listening and participation. Nevertheless, perceived gaps in communication, inconsistent messages, and insufficient transparency surrounding major decisions can produce rumors, misunderstandings, suspicion, and conflict. This represents a significant challenge because communication is central to Spears’ characteristics of listening, awareness, persuasion, and community building. Servant leadership requires more than creating opportunities for people to speak; employees and students must also perceive that their contributions are genuinely considered and that leaders communicate decisions transparently. Van Dierendonck (2011) emphasizes humility, authenticity, empowerment, and stewardship as important elements of servant leadership, suggesting that inconsistent communication can weaken the trust on which these practices depend.

Fourth, weak accountability and inconsistent policy implementation may create a contradiction between service and performance. When members perceive inconsistent disciplinary practices, limited follow-through on recommendations, poor performance going unchecked, and policies being applied selectively in their organization, these conditions can weaken leaders’ credibility and create perceptions of unfairness. Importantly, servant leadership should not be confused with permissive leadership. Greenleaf’s concept of stewardship requires leaders to manage people, resources, and institutions responsibly (Greenleaf, 1977). At UCBC, weak evaluation systems and insufficient performance indicators could therefore undermine stewardship. Accountability must be understood as a mechanism for protecting organizational purpose and fairness rather than as an authoritarian practice.

Fifth, resource constraints may make servant leadership difficult to sustain. The DRC’s economic insecurity and institutional fragility create an environment in which organizations may operate with limited resources and considerable uncertainty. At UCBC, irregular salary payments, staffing imbalances, workload pressures, limited recognition, and restricted professional-development opportunities may weaken employee morale and trust. These challenges are particularly important because servant leadership emphasizes the growth and well-being of followers. It becomes difficult for leaders to demonstrate genuine commitment to employee development when financial and human resources are insufficient. Moreover, multifunctional roles and overlapping mandates can reduce operational efficiency and make responsibility for decisions unclear. The DRC’s broader

governance environment similarly demonstrates how poorly defined responsibilities and institutional complexity can weaken accountability ([International Monetary Fund \[IMF\], 2021](#)).

Sixth, rapid organizational growth may challenge the preservation of UCBC's relational culture. UCBC has developed from a relatively small institution into a more complex university with multiple schools, initiatives, and employees. Growth can create distance between leaders and employees, increase bureaucratic procedures, and weaken the informal relationships that previously supported community building. The challenge is therefore to scale servant leadership without reducing it to symbolic practices or slogans. Mechanisms such as mentoring, reflection days, employee engagement surveys, participatory decision-making, and regular leadership evaluation become increasingly important as the institution grows.

Seventh, UCBC operates in eastern DRC, a region affected by prolonged conflict, displacement, insecurity, and humanitarian crises. Its practices of healing, empathy, community building, and awareness are therefore particularly relevant. Counseling, chaplaincy, retreats, debriefing, and community support can help address the effects of conflict. However, these practices also place substantial emotional and professional demands on leaders and staff.

A potential challenge is therefore caregiver fatigue and limited institutional capacity. Leaders who are expected to listen, empathize, counsel, mentor, and support others may themselves experience emotional exhaustion, particularly when they are simultaneously managing institutional pressures and insecurity. Sustaining servant leadership in a conflict-affected environment consequently requires systems that support the well-being of leaders as well as followers.

Eight and finally, servant leadership may be weakened when organizational culture emphasizes community without sufficient innovation and strategic discipline. UCBC demonstrates characteristics of a collaborative, community-oriented culture, which strongly supports servant leadership. However, an excessive emphasis on harmony may discourage constructive dissent, difficult conversations, experimentation, or challenging established practices. Sustainable servant leadership therefore requires both community and adaptive capacity. Foresight and conceptualization should enable leaders to anticipate organizational pressures, while accountability and performance systems ensure that service translates into institutional effectiveness.

Overall, the literature indicates that UCBC's application of servant leadership is both promising and challenging. Its practices closely correspond with Spears' ten characteristics and resonate with communal values such as solidarity, relational responsibility, and Ubuntu. However, the potential challenges facing UCBC are interconnected rather than isolated. Historical hierarchy can influence attitudes toward authority; cultural relationships can affect fairness; resource constraints can intensify workload and financial pressures; and weak accountability can undermine communication, trust, and performance. Consequently, servant

leadership at UCBC should be approached as a systems-level organizational practice, rather than merely as a set of desirable leadership behaviors. Strengthening transparent communication, clarifying roles, establishing equitable performance evaluation, improving workforce, ensuring financial transparency, and reinforcing consistent accountability can help UCBC preserve the relational strengths of servant leadership while addressing the structural conditions that may constrain its effectiveness. In this sense, the long-term sustainability of servant leadership at UCBC depends on aligning its values, leadership behaviors, organizational culture, and institutional structures.

6. Strategies for Sustaining the Model at UCBC

Given the interconnected challenges facing UCBC, sustaining servant leadership model requires more than encouraging individual leaders to behave as servants. The approach needs to be institutionalized through organizational structures, policies, communication systems, human-resource practices, and leadership development. The following strategies correspond to the eight challenges identified above.

6.1. Institutionalize Servant Leadership through Leadership Development and Role Modeling

To address the persistence of hierarchical leadership traditions, UCBC should strengthen systematic servant-leadership formation for current and emerging leaders. Leadership development should emphasize humility, listening, empowerment, participatory decision-making, and stewardship while helping leaders distinguish servant leadership from either authoritarianism or excessive permissiveness. Senior leaders should consistently model these behaviors because organizational members are more likely to internalize values when they observe them demonstrated by those occupying positions of authority. Regular leadership retreats, mentoring, peer reflection, and 360-degree feedback could reinforce these practices. This approach would help transform servant leadership from an individual preference into an institutional leadership norm (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011).

6.2. Combine Relational Culture with Transparent and Equitable Systems

To address the tension between communal relationships and organizational fairness, UCBC should reinforce clear, transparent criteria for recruitment, promotion, professional development, recognition, and allocation of institutional opportunities. Relational values such as Tuko Pamoja and Ubuntu should be intentionally interpreted as inclusive responsibility rather than preferential treatment. Decisions involving employment and resource allocation should therefore be based on transparent criteria and documented procedures. Such systems can preserve the strengths of collectivist and communal cultures while reducing the risks of favoritism and patronage (House et al., 2004; Wanasika et al., 2011).

6.3. Establish a Structured Two-Way Communication System

To strengthen listening, trust, and participation, UCBC should complement existing family talks, retreats, and small groups with formal communication mechanisms. Major institutional decisions should be communicated before implementation whenever possible, with opportunities for employees and students to provide feedback. The university could establish regular town-hall meetings, anonymous feedback channels, departmental communication protocols, and mechanisms for reporting how stakeholder recommendations were considered. Importantly, listening should be followed by visible responses so that participation is experienced as meaningful rather than symbolic. Such practices directly reinforce the servant-leadership characteristics of listening, awareness, persuasion, and community building (Asimwe & Kwani, 2025; van Dierendonck, 2011).

6.4. Institutionalize Fair Accountability and Performance Management

To address weak accountability and inconsistent policy implementation, UCBC should establish a transparent performance-management system that includes updated job descriptions, clearly defined responsibilities, measurable performance indicators, regular evaluations, and consistently applied policies. Accountability should apply equally to leaders and employees and should be understood as an expression of stewardship rather than punishment. Performance problems should be addressed constructively through coaching, support, and, when necessary, appropriate corrective action. Clear procedures would reduce role ambiguity, perceptions of impunity, and selective enforcement while strengthening organizational credibility. This is consistent with Greenleaf's (1977) conception of stewardship as responsible management of organizational resources and people.

6.5. Develop Sustainable Human-Resource and Financial Stewardship Mechanisms

To address resource constraints, UCBC should strengthen workforce planning, salary administration, staff development, and financial transparency. Staffing needs should be periodically assessed to identify workload imbalances and overlapping responsibilities. Where financial limitations make regular salary payments or professional development difficult, leaders should communicate openly about institutional constraints and priorities. A transparent framework for professional-development opportunities, employee recognition, and benefits can further strengthen perceptions of equity. These measures reflect servant leadership's commitment to the growth and well-being of people while recognizing that stewardship requires responsible management of scarce resources (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck, 2011).

6.6. Use Strategic Growth and Succession Planning to Preserve Organizational Culture

As UCBC expands, it should deliberately protect the relational culture that char-

acterized its earlier development while adapting its structures to increasing complexity. This can be achieved through formal succession planning, leadership pipelines, mentoring, orientation programs, and systematic transmission of institutional values to new employees. Organizational roles and reporting relationships should also be periodically reviewed to prevent overlapping mandates. Rather than assuming that culture will automatically survive institutional growth, UCBC should intentionally embed servant leadership into recruitment, orientation, leadership development, promotion, and evaluation processes. Such institutionalization can help maintain continuity while enabling the organization to evolve.

6.7. Establish Systems for Leader and Staff Well-Being in the Conflict-Affected Context

Given UCBC's location in eastern DRC, sustaining servant leadership requires attention to the well-being of those who provide care and support to others. The university should expand existing counseling, chaplaincy, debriefing, and spiritual-support mechanisms to include leaders and staff. Regular reflective retreats, peer-support groups, workload monitoring, and access to professional psychological support could reduce caregiver fatigue and emotional exhaustion. Leadership responsibilities should also be distributed rather than concentrated on a few individuals. This would allow UCBC to maintain its practices of healing, empathy, and community building without placing unsustainable emotional demands on individual leaders.

6.8. Balance Community with Innovation, Constructive Dissent, and Strategic Discipline

Finally, UCBC should ensure that its strong community-oriented culture does not unintentionally discourage disagreement or innovation. Leaders should explicitly legitimize respectful dissent, critical questioning, experimentation, and learning from failure. Innovation forums, cross-functional projects, periodic organizational reviews, and opportunities for employees and students to propose new initiatives could strengthen this dimension. Foresight and conceptualization—two of Spears' servant-leadership characteristics—can help leaders connect present decisions with future institutional needs (Blanchard & Broadwell, 2018). A culture that combines community, accountability, and experimentation would enable UCBC to remain faithful to servant leadership while adapting to a changing environment.

Taken together, these strategies suggest that sustaining servant leadership at UCBC requires institutional alignment. Leadership development must be supported by fair systems; communication must be connected to decision-making; service must be accompanied by accountability; and community must be balanced with innovation and strategic planning. Such alignment can help UCBC preserve the authenticity of its servant-leadership identity while strengthening organizational effectiveness and resilience.

7. Conclusion

This article has examined the application of servant leadership at the Christian Bilingual University of Congo (UCBC) within the broader historical, cultural, economic, and institutional context of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The analysis demonstrates that servant leadership offers a relevant and potentially transformative approach to leadership in a context where hierarchical traditions, institutional fragility, corruption, resource constraints, and prolonged conflict continue to shape life and leadership. At the same time, the study shows that the effectiveness and sustainability of servant leadership cannot be understood independently of these contextual realities.

UCBC provides a compelling example of how servant leadership can be embedded within an institutional culture rather than practiced merely as an individual leadership style. Its vision, mission, core values, holistic educational model, and community-oriented practices reflect key dimensions of Greenleaf's philosophy and Spears' ten characteristics, including listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and community building. Practices such as participatory decision-making, mentoring, service-learning, counseling, staff development, and community support demonstrate the institution's effort to translate servant-leadership principles into everyday organizational life.

However, the analysis also indicates that servant leadership at UCBC faces interconnected challenges. Historical patterns of hierarchical authority may conflict with participatory leadership; communal relationships can strengthen solidarity but also create risks of favoritism; inadequate communication can weaken trust and participation; inconsistent accountability can undermine organizational fairness; and financial and human-resource constraints can limit the institution's capacity to support its members. Furthermore, rapid organizational growth and the realities of operating in a conflict-affected environment create additional pressures on UCBC's relational culture and on the well-being of its leaders and staff.

Consequently, sustaining servant leadership requires more than the commitment of individual leaders. It requires institutional alignment between leadership development, transparent communication, equitable human-resource practices, accountability systems, financial stewardship, succession planning, staff well-being, and organizational learning. The proposed strategies emphasize that servant leadership should be institutionalized through structures and policies that reinforce, rather than contradict, its underlying values.

Ultimately, UCBC illustrates both the promise and complexity of servant leadership in the DRC. Its alignment with communal values such as Ubuntu and Tuko Pamoja provides an important cultural foundation, while its educational and organizational practices demonstrate the potential of leadership rooted in service, dignity, empowerment, and collective well-being. Nevertheless, its long-term sustainability will depend on the institution's ability to integrate these relational values with transparency, accountability, strategic discipline, and adaptive capacity.

Servant leadership at UCBC should therefore be understood not simply as an alternative style of leadership, but as an ongoing process of organizational transformation capable of contributing to the university's mission of developing leaders who are prepared not only to be transformed, but also to transform their communities.

Beyond UCBC, this paper offers valuable lessons for higher learning institutions in the DRC and other contexts seeking to build transformative educational environments. It provides a practical framework for understanding how servant leadership can shape institutional culture and strengthen organizational systems, and outcomes. Institutions of learning can draw from UCBC's experience to reflect on their own leadership practices, adapt servant-leadership principles to their unique contexts, and intentionally cultivate environments where students, staff, and communities are empowered to participate in meaningful transformation.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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