# SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN NON- GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs)

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## ABSTRACT

*Non- Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have become influential development agents in the developing world in recent decades through their so-called "sustainable" activities". This study aimed to examine leadership style in Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Kuching. Data was collected from 100 employees in 30 NGOs. The instrument used to measure servant leadership was the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) developed by Laub (1999). Results of the instrument's Cronbach Alpha measurement show that the score of reliability is above .90 which indicates an acceptable level. The results indicate that servant leadership is dominant leadership style in NGOs. This study provides insights on servant leadership in NGOs. The findings of this study may help NGOs to enhance its leadership capabilities and leadership development programs for the NGOs leaders to develop their servant leadership capacity. Limitations and recommendations are also discussed.*

**Keywords**: *NGOs, Non- Governmental Organizations, Leadership, Servant leadership,*

## Introduction

The emergence of civil society organizations throughout the world has been noteworthy over the past decade. NGOs (including non- governmental, faith based, and community based organizations) are playing an increasingly important role in tackling the world's greatest challenges – from HIV/AIDS and the environment, to poverty and inequality. Skilled organizational leaders are absolutely essential for successfully addressing these challenges and navigating the rapidly changing environments in which NGOs operate. The benefits of leadership strengthening within NGOs are many. Strong leadership in the NGO context can result in an inspired and empowered staff, programs and projects that are consistently infused with the essence of the organization's mission and vision, and a "big picture" orientation that is married to concrete action. Effective leadership can also increase an NGO's legitimacy in the eyes of donors, partners, and beneficiaries, thus potentially contributing to greater organizational sustainability, more effective and strategic partnerships, and higher quality delivery of services. In Malaysia NGOs play a vital role in the transformation of Malaysia towards a developed nation in 2020. This being the case leadership in NGOs is an important aspect that needs to be researched empirically. However, little attention has been given to leadership in NGOs. Therefore, the aim of this study is to address this gap by conducting an empirical study of servant leadership in NGOs in Kuching. The objective of this study is to examine the characteristics of servant leadership in NGOs in Kuching and provide suggestions on how to enhance servant leadership in NGOs.

## Literature Review

### Overview of NGOs

In Sarawak, NGOs have been blooming ever since there is an increase in civil awareness to pursue activities that cater to social needs. Most of the local NGOs are concerned with helping those who are disadvantaged physically, mentally, socially or economically. A number advocate the care for the environment and animal welfare. In Kuching, according to the Registrar of societies record, there are 927 NGOs in Kuching in 2007. Many of them are not active. Most of the NGOs cater for religious, cultural, social recreation and welfare activities. Most of the NGOs in Kuching depend on donations from the public and fundraising activities to finance their activities. Most of the NGOs are run by volunteers who donate their time for a social cause.

Meanwhile, Welfare, Women and Family Development Minister Datuk Fatimah Abdullah said that women need to be more active in voluntary activities, especially in rural areas. She added that grass-root leaders should not only leave such activities to their representatives, but women in non-government organisations (NGOs) should also shoulder the responsibility (Equal opportunities for women in SCORE, too, says Jamilah, 2014). Community and social development is among the priorities of the state government, particularly in the development of women and their role in society. Chief Minister Tan Sri Datuk Amar Haji Adenan Haji Satem said the women's organisations and associations could assist the state government in furthering the development of Sarawak. Together with dedicated NGO's and supportive women's groups, Sarawak should continue to educate and develop up and coming women leaders who will one day lead the state to new heights (Nawawi, 2014). In short, the importance of women leaders in NGOs, is visible where they serve as role models for other women. These women leaders advocate for their rights and encourage women not to be passive, but to take actions and stand for their rights." Initiatives from women leaders in NGOs have been effecting significant changes in government policies and programmes towards women.

Kaldor (2005), Schiller (2005), and Gray et al. (2006) stated non-government organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations have been established in significant numbers worldwide in the past decades. While play more importance roles in social services, the NGOs are becoming more practical, flexible, and less strict. The organizations are trying to develop better working environments to gain credibility among policy makers aiming to improve their reputation in the society. A non-governmental organization (NGO) is a not-for-profit, voluntary citizens' group, which is organized on a local, national or international level to address issues in support of the public good. Task-oriented and made up of people with a common interest, NGOs perform a variety of services and humanitarian functions, bring citizens' concerns to Governments, monitor policy and programme implementation, and encourage participation of civil society stakeholders at the community level. They provide analysis and expertise, serve as early warning mechanisms and help monitor and implement international agreements. Some are organized around specific issues, such as human rights, the environment or health.

NGO's have therefore played major roles in various societies all over the world. They have been effective in highlighting pertinent issues that affect societies concerning environment, safety, consumerism, freedom of expression, human rights, poverty, welfare and the like. They have also participated in rescue works on those afflicted by wars and natural catastrophes complementing the efforts of national governments and international agencies. Most of them are non-profit oriented since they generally receive funds from philanthropists

and public donations. Although initially inspired by the strong desire to help others, many NGO's are active in championing issues on behalf of the public but are not in a position to actually implement projects to overcome the problems at hand. In that case they are only interested to make the public aware of the problems and sometimes the dangers society is facing.  They have generally succeeded in creating so much awareness and publicity through their vigorous campaigns that the governments have no choice but to quickly take the necessary steps to overcome the problems. They act as trouble shooters and pressure groups for the public to the extent that they appear to be very antagonistic towards governments.

In some cases like environmental protection, human rights issues and HIV/AIDS, NGO's undertake special projects for the society because the government may not be in a position to effectively do so for various reasons. First, they are generally not affiliated to the government and hence enjoy the independence and autonomy which government departments and agencies do not. Secondly they are apolitical and are therefore relatively free to highlight issues that are of concern to the government. Thirdly, those involved are normally people with very strong commitment to the cause.  These volunteers are generally not interested in any form of material reward or even recognition, except in the insatiable feeling of satisfaction that they have rendered some service and be useful to others. Their works are complementary to the government efforts. Some have been given recognition by governments and receive tremendous moral and material support from both the public and governments.  More and more of such NGO's have been established which are dedicated for many socially productive activities. Their roles are becoming increasingly significant in many societies because the tasks the governments were expected to do in the last three to four decades will have to be taken over by non-profit community organisations or NGO's.

## The Role of NGOs

Increasingly, the existence of NGOs is proving to be a necessity rather than a luxury in societies throughout the modern world. I believe that the history of the 20th century persuasively demonstrated the inabilityof the welfare state and free enterprise to create just and sustainable societies. Prompted by the inadequacies of the state and the market, citizens across the globe have developed organizations of civil society – NGOs – to help address a wide variety of social needs.NGOs have three primary roles in advancing modern societies.

First, NGOs provide opportunity for the self-organization of society. NGOs enable citizens to work together voluntarily to promote social values and civic goals which are important to them. They promote local initiative and problem-solving. Through their work in a broad array of fields – environment, health, poverty alleviation, culture & the arts, education, etc. – NGOs reflect the diversity of society itself. They are established and sustained by individuals working collectively in their communities. By empowering citizens and promoting change at the "grass roots", NGOs both represent and advance the pluralism and diversity that are characteristic of vibrant and successful modern societies.

Second, NGOs preserve a unique and essential space between the for-profit sector and government. Clearly private enterprise is efficient at producing goods and *private* wealth. Government is best when it focuses on providing and managing *public* goods. The nonprofit, non- governmental sector helps fulfill the *common* good. A vibrant third sector provides a fulcrum for balancing the state and the free market. This middle ground is an essential arena for promoting additional checks and balances in society. Only independent organizations can serve as watchdogs of both government and business. At the same time, NGOs can build

creative and productive partnerships across and among the three sectors – partnerships that draw on the unique strengths of each to advance the common good.

Finally, NGOs enable experimentation and social change by taking on challenges that that the public and private sectors simply can't or won't. Civil society organizations are able to take risks that are economically unacceptable to business and politically unacceptable to government. In modern societies across the globe, countless innovations pioneered by NGOs have subsequently been adopted as government policy. Numerous models of service delivery that are considered "best practice" today were devised, tested, and improved over many years of experimentation by NGOs. In addition, NGO advocacy campaigns induce reluctant governments to adopt policy reforms and force improvements in business practices.

As modernizing economies increasingly shift to free markets and private enterprise, they often experience a decline in social cohesion and an increase in economic and social inequity. In these circumstances the non- governmental sector has proven to be an essential mitigating force that helps create a healthier balance between the potential excesses of capitalism and the inefficiencies and limited resources of the state.

## Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a line where a leader serves followers, not vice-versa (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership stresses increased service to others and encourages the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of followers (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leaders develop people by providing learning and growth opportunities for their followers (Laub, 1999). Servant leadership has the followers as its main focus, where they grow as persons and thereby are more likely to also reach the goals of the organization.

Frick (2004) had mentioned that the term servant leadership was first coined in a 1970 essay by Robert K. Greenleaf (1904-1990) entitled, *The Servant as Leader*. Based on the research done by Gonzaga University and The Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership (2005), person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need of unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such people, it will be a later choice to serve after leadership is established.

On the other hand, various other writers espoused servant leadership as a valid modern theory for organizational leadership (Russell, 2001). This statement was supported by Covey (1998) where he said that "the servant leadership concept is a principle, a natural law, getting our social value system and personal habit aligned with this ennobling principle is one of the great challenges of our lives". Servant leaders rely upon service and in so doing they endear the followers to the leaders to reciprocal relationship. It is because followers' performance affects organization performance and leaders of organizational influence follower performance. In addition, the theory of servant leader emerged when Greenleaf (1997) defined the role of the leader as servant. The leader as a person; first responsible to serve others by being a seeker of the needs, wants and wishes of those to be served before aspiring to lead (Bugenhagen, 2006). Once they know how to support those they serve, the leader's obligation becomes to lift up those being served and while being served these followers may indicate to meet the needs of others through their own servant leader behavior.

Becoming a servant leader begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve and focus on the followers, whereby the followers get more attention and concern compared to the organizational (Patterson, 2003). The central idea of servant leadership theory is that the servant-leader is first a servant. The servant leader's primary objective is to serve and meet the need for other, which optimally should be the prime motivation for leadership (Russell & Stone, 2002). As a result, the leaders need to place the need of the employees first, even if it is

to the detriment of the company. Employees should no longer be viewed merely as numbers, but as human being.

As we know what the servant leader's task is devote them to serving the needs of organizations members because they believe that servant leadership is a philosophy that leads managers to consider and fulfill the needs of employees so that the employees will be motivated fulfills the organizations needs (Tinsley & Austin, 2006). On the other hand, McCrimmon (2009) also mentioned that they also focus on meeting the needs of those they lead, develop employees to bring out the best in them, coach others and encourage their self expression and the last point is listen and build a sense of community.

Table 1: Servant Leadership Attributes

| *Laub (1999)* | *Wong & Page (2000)* | *Spears (2002)* | *Greenleaf ( 1997)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| • *Values People* <br> • *Develops people* <br> • *Builds community* <br> • *Displays authenticity* <br> • *Provides leadership* <br> • *Shares leadership* | • *Integrity* <br> • *Humility* <br> • *Servant hood* <br> • *Caring for others Empowering Others* <br> • *Developing Others* <br> • *Visioning* <br> • *Goal setting* <br> • *Leading* <br> • *Modelling* <br> • *Team building* <br> • *Shared decision-making* | • *Listening* <br> • *Empathy* <br> • *Healing* <br> • *Awareness* <br> • *Persuasion* <br> • *Conceptualization* <br> • *Foresight* <br> • *Stewardship* <br> • *Commitment to the growth of people Building community* | • *Growth of People* <br> • *Stewardship* <br> • *Building Community* |

Laub (1999) identified six components and accompanying behavior characteristics in relation to a servant organization. The components include servant leadership as someone who values people, develops people, builds community, displays authenticity, provides leadership and shares leadership (Laub, 1999). Wong and Page (2003) identified twelve attributes of servant leadership to be integrity, humility, servant hood, caring for others, empowering others, developing others, visioning, goal setting, leading, modeling, team building and shared decision making. Spears (2002) states ten aspects of servant leadership as listening, empathy, healing awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship commitment to the growth of people and building community. Greenleaf (1997) index of servant leadership comprise three aspects namely growth of people, stewardship and building community. This is summarized in Table 1. In conclusion; servant leadership can be used by

organizations like NGOs to achieve a balance between work and social life which is guided by a belief in building and developing an organization through a genuine sense of humility.


## Methodology

A survey design was used to reach the research objectives. The specific design was the cross sectional design, where a sample is drawn from a population at a particular point in time (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1997). About 120 questionnaires were distributed to employees in 30 NGOs in Kuching. About 100 employees returned back the questionnaire giving a response rate of 83%. The instrument used to measure servant leadership was the Organizational Leadership Assessment (OLA) developed by Laub (1999). This instrument has eighteen items which measures six dimensions of servant leadership: values people, develops people, builds community, displays authenticity, provides leadership and shares leadership. Responses were measured using 5 point Likert scale 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). For measuring effectiveness of the NGOs and its leadership single item questions were used in the study. Respondents were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the NGOs and its leadership using the 5 point scale namely 1 (Not affective) to 5 (Very Effective). Results of the instrument's Cronbach Alpha measurement show that the score of reliability is above .90 which indicates an acceptable level. The number of registered NGOs in Kuching is 926 which is categorized into 13 categories and 30 were selected as sample for this study. Each NGO was sent 4 questionnaires to be filled by their respective members. The questionnaires were distributed from March 2013 to April 2013. This is summarized in Table 2.


Table 2: .Number And Category of Ngo's Registered in Kuching 2007

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Social and Recreation | 239 |
| 2. | Social Welfare | 99 |
| 3. | Religious | 153 |
| 4. | Women | 14 |
| 5. | Commerce | 115 |
| 6. | Politics | 6 |
| 7. | Education | 8 |
| 8. | Occupation | 56 |
| 9. | Environment | 5 |
| 10. | Sport | 98 |
| 11. | Culture. | 107 |
| 12. | Youth | 4 |
| 13. | General (others) | 22 |
| | **Total number of NGO's** | **926** |

*Source: Registrar of Society, Kuching (System I-ROS 2007)*

## Findings and Discussion

### Demographic Profile

Most of the respondents were females (86 percent) and were aged between 18 and 40 years old (85 percent). Regarding ethnicity about 38 percent of the respondents are Bidayuh followed by Iban 34 percent. Most of the respondents are SPM holders or SPTM (49 percent) as for the occupations of the respondents are Clerical (43 percent) followed by executives (20 percent). Majority of respondents earned between RM1, 000 to RM3, 000 (68 percent). This is summarized in Table 3.

### NGO Profile

As for the profile of NGOs majority of the NGOs have about 50 to 100 members (46 percent). Regarding years in existence most of the NGOs have been in operation for more than 10 years (79 percent). As for categories of NGOs about 23 percent were Social Welfare followed by Women NGOs (17 percent) and Social and Recreation (13 percent). This is summarized in Table 4.

Table 3: Respondents Profile (N= 100)

| ITEMS | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **GENDER** | | |
| Male | 14 | 14 |
| Female | 86 | 86 |
| **AGE** | | |
| 18-29 years | 47 | 47 |
| 30-40 years | 38 | 38 |
| 41-50 years | 10 | 10 |
| Above 50 years | 5 | 5 |
| | | |
| **ETHNICITY** | | |
| Malay | 12 | 12 |
| Iban | 34 | 34 |
| Bidayauh | 38 | 38 |
| Chinese | 9 | 9 |
| Others | 7 | 7 |
| | | |
| **EDUCATION LEVEL** | | |
| SPM | 29 | 29 |
| STPM | 20 | 20 |
| Diploma | 26 | 26 |
| Degree | 25 | 25 |
| | | |
| **OCCUPATION** | | |
| Professional | 16 | 16 |
| Technical | 11 | 11 |
| Executive | 20 | 20 |

| Clerical | 43 | 43 |
| Others | 10 | 10 |

Table 4: NGOs Profile

| ITEMS | Numbers | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| **SIZE/MEMBERSHIP** | | |
| Below 50 | 12 | 12 |
| 50-100 | 17 | 17 |
| 101-200 | 29 | 29 |
| 201-300 | 19 | 19 |
| 301-400 | 6 | 6 |
| 401-500 | 5 | 5 |
| Above 500 | 12 | 12 |
| **YEARS IN EXISTENCE** | | |
| 1-3 years | 24 | 24 |
| 2-6 years | 24 | 24 |
| 7-10 years | 31 | 31 |
| 10-15 years | 11 | 11 |
| Above 15 years | 10 | 10 |
| **CATEGORY** | | |
| Social & Recreation | 13 | 13 |
| Social Welfare | 23 | 23 |
| Religious | 9 | 9 |
| Women | 17 | 17 |
| Commerce | 3 | 3 |
| Education | 10 | 10 |
| Occupation | 4 | 4 |
| Youth | 8 | 8 |
| General (others) | 11 | 11 |

Results shows that the servant leadership is the dominant leadership style practiced in NGOs (M= 4.08, SD.576). Regarding the dimensions of servant leadership the highest mean is for provides leadership (M= 3.85, SD .571) followed by develops people and builds community (M = 3.82, SD .534) and (M=3.82, SD.553) respectively. This indicates that the main leadership style in NGOs is servant leadership which focuses on providing leadership and developing people and a sense of community amongst its members. This is summarized in Table 5.

Table 5:  Means of Servant Leadership Construct (N=100) (Scale 1-5)

| Constructs | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|
| Servant Leadership | 4.08 | .576 |
| • Values People | 3.73 | .586 |
| • Develops People | 3.82 | .534 |
| • Builds Community | 3.82 | .553 |
| • Displays Authenticity | 3.77 | .603 |
| • Provides Leadership | 3.85 | .571 |
| • Shares leadership | 3.75 | .609 |

Results of correlation test also show a strong positive relationship between servant leadership and effectiveness of NGOs and leadership effectiveness as perceived by its members. Servant leadership is strongly associated with effectiveness of NGOs (r= .747, p <0.01) and leadership effectiveness (r=.778, p< 0.1). This is summarized in Table 6.This indicates that servant leadership enhance effectiveness of NGOs and its leadership effectiveness.

Table 6: Correlation between Servant Leadership and Effectiveness of NGOs and Leadership

| Variables | Servant Leadership ( r value) |
|---|---|
| Effectiveness of NGOs<br>Leadership Effectiveness<br>** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level | .747**<br>.778** |

## Conclusion and Implications

This study concludes that leaders of NGOs in Kuching practices servant leadership in managing their organizations which consist mostly of Social welfare and women NGOs. Considering that the most of the NGOs have been in existence for more 10 years it can be assumed that it has been effectively managed by its servant leaders.  Leadership is an essential element of NGO success and wields the greatest influence when it is exercised at *all levels* of the organization and extends beyond the traditional "boss/ subordinate" relationship and more of a service. Leading without authority means drawing not on power derived from one's formal position in an organization, but on power that comes from valuing and developing people and building community.

The insights from this study can be used to develop servant leadership development programs for NGOs leaders in Kuching as a step in developing human capital in NGOs. In addition the management of NGOs can also look at leadership succession issues in NGOs. The relevant authorities also can use the findings of this study as input to enhance the effectiveness of NGOs. Therefore, servant leadership style could be a major tool to encourage NGOs leaders to lead more effectively the NGOs. Leadership development programmes designed for NGO leaders must as a consequence incorporate best practice and current

experience rather than using traditional approaches to leadership training. This study has a number of limitations namely the small sample of NGOs covered in the study and low response rate. This limits its generalization to other NGOS in Sarawak. Future study on NGOs can study leadership in women NGOs or challenges faced by NGOs leaders.

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