

Beyond Elitist Power: A Faith-Driven Extension of Servant Leadership in Community-Centered Governance

Agus F. Abdillah^{1*}; Sarach Diba Hidayat²; Doni Sugianto Sihotang³

¹Agung Putra University,

²Universitas Padjadjaran,

³Universitas Negeri Jakarta

Corresponding Author: Agus F. Abdillah^{1*}

Publication Date: 2026/08/24

Abstract: This study extends servant leadership theory by introducing faith-driven governance as its epistemic foundation, explaining how ethics and empathy are constructed and enacted in community-centered contexts. While servant leadership research emphasizes moral and relational dimensions, it provides limited insight into how these values emerge and operate beyond formal organizational settings. Drawing on qualitative analysis of public leadership narratives in Indonesia, this study develops a conceptual framework linking faith (tauhid), embodied experience, and informal welfare institutions. The findings show that faith functions as a moral compass and decision-making logic, shaping leadership orientation. This foundation is reinforced through lived experiences of hardship, generating embodied empathy that informs servant leadership practices oriented toward service and social justice. These practices are operationalized through hybrid welfare governance, particularly via *pesantren*, which provide social protection and community support. The interaction of these elements contributes to community well-being, reflected in dignity restoration, trust, and social inclusion, while also enhancing governance performance, particularly in terms of responsiveness and legitimacy. This study contributes to servant leadership literature by (1) positioning faith as a foundational moral-cognitive structure, (2) identifying embodied leadership as a mechanism linking experience and empathy, and (3) extending servant leadership into informal and community-based governance contexts.

Keywords: *Servant Leadership; Ethical Leadership; Governance Performance; Community Well-Being.*

How to Cite: Agus F. Abdillah; Sarach Diba Hidayat; Doni Sugianto Sihotang (2026) Beyond Elitist Power: A Faith-Driven Extension of Servant Leadership in Community-Centered Governance. *International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology*, 11(8), 1555-1572. <https://doi.org/10.38124/ijisrt/26aug618>

I. INTRODUCTION

Servant leadership has emerged as a prominent paradigm in leadership studies, emphasizing ethics, empathy, and a commitment to serving others as central to effective leadership. A substantial body of research links servant leadership to positive outcomes, including trust, engagement, and organizational well-being, demonstrating its relevance as a value-based leadership approach in contemporary organizations (Parris & Peachey, 2013). These findings have been reinforced by integrative reviews that synthesize decades of research, confirming the consistency of its positive effects across multiple domains of leadership practice (Eva et al., 2019). Cross-cultural evidence further suggests that servant leadership is not confined to Western organizational settings but resonates across diverse cultural and religious

traditions, indicating its broader applicability as a universal leadership paradigm (Roberts, 2018).

Despite these advances, important conceptual gaps remain regarding how ethical orientations and empathic capacities are formed and enacted in practice. Servant leadership continues to be characterized by conceptual fragmentation, with scholars offering varying definitions, dimensions, and measurement approaches that lack theoretical integration (Parris & Peachey, 2013). This lack of definitional clarity limits the cumulative development of the field and creates ambiguity in distinguishing servant leadership from other value-based leadership constructs. Recent scholarship further emphasizes the need to address foundational questions regarding the conceptual boundaries and theoretical grounding of servant leadership, particularly in relation to its underlying mechanisms and epistemic

foundations (Lemoine et al., 2025). These concerns indicate that while servant leadership is empirically robust, its theoretical architecture remains underdeveloped.

Existing servant leadership research largely conceptualizes leadership as a set of observable behaviours or leader attributes within structured organizational environments. While this behavioural approach has generated significant empirical insights, it tends to treat ethics and empathy as assumed qualities rather than as outcomes of deeper formative processes (Eva et al., 2019). As a result, the mechanisms through which servant leadership emerges remain insufficiently theorized, particularly in contexts where leadership is shaped by complex socio-cultural and institutional dynamics. This limitation becomes more evident when leadership is embedded in environments where moral reasoning, lived experience, and informal institutions play a central role in shaping leadership practice. Consequently, existing frameworks provide limited explanatory power for understanding how servant leadership develops in non-traditional contexts.

Methodologically, the dominance of cross-sectional and quantitative research designs further constrains the ability to capture dynamic and processual aspects of leadership formation. While such approaches are effective in identifying relationships between variables, they provide limited insight into how leadership orientations evolve over time and across contexts (McQuade et al., 2021). Recent systematic reviews highlight the need for methodological diversification, particularly through qualitative and longitudinal approaches that can better capture the complexity of leadership processes (Trigoso-Yupari & Gago-Chávez, 2025). This methodological limitation reinforces the broader theoretical gap, as the lack of process-oriented research restricts the ability to explain how servant leadership is constructed and enacted in practice.

Beyond methodological concerns, recent scholarship points to the absence of integrative frameworks that connect antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of servant leadership. While existing studies identify key dimensions such as empathy, ethical behaviour, and service orientation, they rarely explain how these dimensions are generated or sustained over time (Eva et al., 2019). In particular, the role of moral belief systems, such as faith, remains underexplored in mainstream leadership research. Emerging studies suggest that faith can function as a foundational antecedent shaping leadership cognition and ethical orientation, rather than merely serving as a contextual variable (Puls, 2014). This perspective challenges conventional assumptions that ethical leadership is primarily driven by organizational norms or individual traits.

This perspective is further reinforced by research demonstrating that lived faith operates as an internal moral compass guiding decision-making and leadership coherence. Faith-based values influence how leaders interpret responsibility, evaluate outcomes, and prioritize social objectives, thereby shaping leadership behaviour at a fundamental level (Ayina, 2025). At the same time, the

growing intersection between servant leadership and workplace spirituality highlights the need for frameworks that integrate moral, relational, and institutional dimensions of leadership. The absence of such integrative models has been identified as a critical gap in advancing servant leadership theory, particularly in understanding how values are translated into practice (Cissna et al., 2023). This gap is further compounded by the limited attention given to institutional mechanisms that operationalize leadership values into tangible outcomes.

In addition to epistemic limitations, servant leadership research also provides limited insight into how leadership values are translated into governance outcomes beyond organizational settings. While existing studies demonstrate positive effects on employee well-being and organizational performance, they rarely address how servant leadership operates within broader societal and institutional contexts (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022). This limitation is particularly relevant in non-Western contexts, where leadership is often embedded in informal institutions and community-based governance structures. As a result, the broader implications of servant leadership for community well-being and governance performance remain insufficiently explored.

This limitation becomes more pronounced in Global South contexts, where leadership is frequently embedded in faith-based values, lived experiences of hardship, and informal governance systems. In such settings, leadership extends beyond formal organizations and operates through community-centered practices that respond directly to societal needs. These contexts challenge dominant leadership models that assume structured organizational environments and highlight the need for more context-sensitive approaches. Existing research remains largely detached from these realities, limiting its ability to explain leadership practices in diverse socio-cultural environments (McQuade et al., 2021). Consequently, there is a need to expand servant leadership theory to incorporate these contextual dynamics.

Current servant leadership frameworks provide limited explanation of how moral orientations are constructed through deeper epistemic processes. The role of faith as a foundational source of ethical reasoning remains insufficiently theorized, despite growing evidence of its influence on leadership cognition (Puls, 2014). Similarly, empathy is often treated as a stable trait, even though emerging research suggests that it develops through lived and embodied experiences over time (Ayina, 2025). Furthermore, the translation of leadership practices into collective well-being and governance outcomes through informal institutional arrangements remains underexplored, limiting the applicability of existing frameworks to real-world governance contexts (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Addressing these gaps, this study examines the role of faith-driven governance in shaping servant leadership practices and their outcomes in community-centered contexts. It seeks to move beyond behavioural explanations by focusing on the underlying processes through which leadership is formed and enacted. Specifically, the study

addresses the following research question: how does faith-driven governance shape servant leadership practices and contribute to community well-being and governance performance? This question reflects the need to integrate epistemic, experiential, and institutional dimensions of leadership into a unified framework.

This study draws on qualitative analysis of public leadership narratives from Indonesian political leaders. Indonesia provides a compelling empirical setting due to its strong integration of religious values, decentralized governance structures, and the presence of community-based institutions such as *pesantren*. These characteristics enable the examination of leadership at the intersection of faith, lived experience, and informal welfare systems. Moreover, servant leadership has primarily been studied in Western organizational contexts, despite evidence of its cross-cultural relevance across religious traditions (Roberts, 2018). By focusing on Indonesia, the study contributes to expanding the geographical and contextual scope of servant leadership research.

By analyzing leadership narratives, this study captures how leaders construct meaning, justify decisions, and translate values into action. This approach enables a deeper understanding of the processes through which servant leadership is formed and enacted, rather than merely describing its outcomes. It also provides insight into how leadership operates in practice within complex socio-cultural and institutional environments. Through this approach, the study aims to bridge the gap between theoretical abstraction and empirical reality.

This study contributes to servant leadership literature in three main ways. First, it introduces faith-driven governance as a foundational moral and cognitive structure, extending servant leadership beyond behavioural models to include underlying belief systems. Second, it develops the concept of embodied leadership, demonstrating how empathy is generated through lived experiences of hardship and informs leadership practice. Third, it conceptualizes hybrid welfare governance, showing how informal institutions such as *pesantren* operationalize servant leadership and contribute to community well-being and governance performance. By integrating these dimensions, the study offers a more comprehensive and contextually grounded framework for understanding leadership in practice.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature and develops the theoretical framework. Section 3 outlines the research methodology. Section 4 presents the findings and discussion. Section 5 concludes with theoretical and practical implications.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

➤ *Servant Leadership: Ethics, Empathy, and Conceptual Limitations*

Servant leadership has been widely recognized as a value-based leadership approach emphasizing ethics, empathy, and a commitment to serving others as fundamental

principles of effective leadership. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that servant leadership enhances trust, engagement, and organizational performance, reinforcing its relevance across diverse institutional contexts (Parris & Peachey, 2013). Integrative reviews further confirm that servant leadership produces positive relational and psychological outcomes, including increased employee well-being, organizational commitment, and prosocial behaviour (Eva et al., 2019). Cross-cultural evidence also suggests that servant leadership is not confined to Western managerial systems but resonates across diverse religious and societal traditions, indicating its broader normative appeal (Roberts, 2018).

Despite this empirical strength, servant leadership literature continues to face significant theoretical limitations. A central issue concerns the lack of definitional consensus, with multiple conceptualizations coexisting without a unified theoretical framework. This fragmentation results in conceptual ambiguity, making it difficult to distinguish servant leadership from related constructs such as ethical leadership, transformational leadership, and spiritual leadership (Parris & Peachey, 2013). As a result, the construct remains theoretically diffuse, limiting cumulative knowledge development.

A second limitation lies in the dominant behavioural orientation of servant leadership research. Existing frameworks primarily conceptualize servant leadership as a set of observable behaviours or leader attributes, focusing on dimensions such as empathy, humility, and stewardship (Eva et al., 2019). While this approach has generated robust empirical findings, it provides limited insight into how these attributes are formed. Ethics and empathy are frequently treated as pre-existing qualities rather than as outcomes of deeper moral, cognitive, and experiential processes. This creates a theoretical gap in explaining the origins and variability of servant leadership across contexts.

A third limitation concerns contextual scope. Much of the existing literature is grounded in formal organizational settings, where leadership operates within structured hierarchies and managerial systems. This focus limits the applicability of servant leadership to broader societal contexts, particularly public governance and community-based leadership systems (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022). In such contexts, leadership is shaped by informal institutions, cultural norms, and moral belief systems that are not adequately captured by existing frameworks.

Methodologically, servant leadership research has been dominated by cross-sectional and quantitative designs, which constrain the ability to capture dynamic and processual aspects of leadership formation (McQuade et al., 2021). These approaches are effective in identifying correlations but provide limited insight into how leadership orientations develop over time. Recent reviews emphasize the need for methodological diversification, particularly qualitative and longitudinal studies, to better understand leadership formation processes (Trigoso-Yupari & Gago-Chávez, 2025).

Taken together, these limitations highlight the absence of integrative frameworks that connect antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes of servant leadership. While existing studies identify key dimensions and outcomes, they rarely explain how these elements interact to produce leadership practices. This gap is particularly evident in

contexts where leadership is shaped by faith, lived experience, and informal governance structures.

To synthesize these limitations, Table 1 presents a comparative overview of key gaps in servant leadership literature and the extensions proposed in this study.

Table 1 Theoretical Gaps in Servant Leadership and Proposed Extensions

Dimension	Existing Servant Leadership Literature	Faith/Spiritual Leadership Literature	This Study (Proposed Extension)
Conceptual Definition	Fragmented, lack of consensus (Parris & Peachey, 2013; Eva et al., 2019)	Overlap with spiritual leadership, unclear boundaries (Contreras, 2016)	Reframed through epistemic foundation (faith-driven governance)
Theoretical Focus	Behavioral and trait-based	Normative and value-based	Moral-cognitive structure (faith as epistemic logic)
Mechanism of Formation	Largely unspecified	Assumed internal development	Embodied leadership (experience → structural empathy)
Role of Context	Organizational, Western-dominated	Religious but decontextualized	Community-centered, Global South governance
Institutional Dimension	Limited attention to institutions	Focus on values, not systems	Hybrid welfare governance (informal + formal)
Outcome Orientation	Organizational outcomes	Ethical/spiritual outcomes	Community well-being + governance performance

➤ *Faith-Driven Governance as an Epistemic Foundation*

To address these gaps, this study introduces faith-driven governance as an epistemic foundation of servant leadership. In this perspective, faith is not merely a normative influence but a foundational structure shaping leadership cognition. Faith provides a moral framework through which leaders interpret reality, evaluate actions, and define their responsibilities (Puls, 2014).

Unlike conventional leadership models that treat ethics as external standards, faith-driven governance positions ethical behaviour as internally constructed through belief systems. This internalization process creates consistency between values and actions, enabling leaders to maintain ethical coherence across contexts. Such an approach is particularly relevant in environments where formal institutional controls are limited.

Research demonstrates that religious values influence governance practices by shaping trust, accountability, and social responsibility (Ayina, 2025). Faith-based leadership emphasizes moral accountability beyond institutional performance, linking leadership decisions to broader ethical principles. This expands the scope of servant leadership by integrating moral cognition into governance processes.

However, the relationship between servant leadership and spirituality remains contested. Some scholars argue that the two constructs overlap significantly, raising questions about conceptual distinctiveness (Contreras, 2016). This study addresses this debate by positioning faith as an epistemic foundation rather than a parallel dimension. In doing so, it clarifies the role of faith in shaping leadership cognition and extends servant leadership beyond behavioural explanations.

➤ *Embodied Leadership and the Formation of Empathy*

A second theoretical extension concerns the formation of empathy within servant leadership. While existing literature identifies empathy as a core dimension, it is often treated as a stable psychological trait or interpersonal skill (Eva et al., 2019). This study challenges this assumption by conceptualizing empathy as a socially and experientially constructed capacity.

The concept of embodied leadership is introduced to capture this process. In this framework, empathy emerges through lived experiences of hardship, marginalization, and social struggle. Such experiences shape leadership cognition and moral sensitivity, producing what can be described as structural empathy, a deeper understanding of systemic inequalities, that informs decision-making. This perspective is supported by research showing that formative experiences play a critical role in shaping leadership orientation and ethical judgment (Puls, 2014).

This process-oriented view aligns with evidence that lived experience influences leadership meaning-making and ethical reasoning (Ayina, 2025). It also responds to methodological critiques that servant leadership research has been limited in capturing dynamic and developmental processes due to its reliance on cross-sectional designs (McQuade et al., 2021). By linking lived experience to leadership practice, embodied leadership provides a mechanism explaining how servant leadership emerges in context.

➤ *Informal Welfare Institutions and Hybrid Governance*

Servant leadership becomes operationally meaningful when embedded within institutional structures. In many Global South contexts, leadership operates through informal institutions that play a central role in welfare provision. The

lack of integration between leadership theory and institutional analysis has been identified as a key gap (Cissna et al., 2023).

This study conceptualizes pesantren as hybrid welfare institutions that combine educational, social, and economic

functions. These institutions provide social protection, community support, and economic empowerment, addressing gaps in formal governance systems.

Table 2 Mechanisms Linking Leadership to Outcomes

Component	Function	Outcome
Faith	Moral cognition	Ethical orientation
Experience	Empathy formation	Policy sensitivity
Leadership	Service orientation	Social intervention
Institution	Welfare delivery	Community well-being
Governance	Coordination	Performance

Research highlights the role of such institutions in enhancing community well-being by integrating moral and social functions (Cissna et al., 2023). Faith-based systems also contribute to governance by providing alternative mechanisms for resource distribution (Houston, 2023).

➤ *Community-Centered Governance and Leadership Outcomes*

The interaction between leadership and institutions ultimately shapes governance outcomes. In community-centered governance, decision-making is grounded in local needs, social participation, and collective deliberation, in contrast to top-down administrative models. Empirical evidence shows that servant leadership enhances public value creation and stakeholder engagement in governance contexts (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Research on local governance systems further demonstrates that participatory practices and culturally embedded values contribute to inclusive and effective governance (Thoha et al., 2025). These findings highlight the importance of contextual knowledge and social capital in shaping governance performance.

Within this framework, servant leadership contributes to community well-being, reflected in dignity restoration, trust, and social inclusion. At the same time, it enhances governance performance through responsiveness, legitimacy, and alignment with community needs. These outcomes extend the relevance of servant leadership beyond organizational settings to broader societal and governance contexts.

These outcomes provide a critical bridge between leadership processes and societal impact, demonstrating that servant leadership contributes not only to organizational effectiveness but also to public value creation, social cohesion, and governance legitimacy. This reinforces the need to reposition servant leadership as a governance-oriented framework rather than a purely organizational construct.

➤ *Conceptual Model*

Building on the preceding discussion, this study proposes a conceptual model linking faith-driven governance, embodied leadership, and hybrid welfare institutions to governance outcomes. This integrative framework responds

to calls for models that connect antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes within servant leadership theory (Eva et al., 2019).

Faith functions as the moral-cognitive structure shaping ethical orientation and decision-making (Puls, 2014). This foundation is reinforced through embodied experiences, which generate empathy as a socially constructed capacity (Ayina, 2025). Empathy, in turn, informs servant leadership practices oriented toward service, humility, and social responsibility (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

These practices are operationalized through informal welfare institutions, translating leadership values into concrete social interventions (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022). The interaction of these elements contributes to community well-being and governance performance, including social cohesion, trust, and institutional legitimacy (Thoha et al., 2025).



Fig 1 Conceptual Model of Faith-Driven Servant Leadership and Governance Outcomes

This model integrates epistemic, experiential, and institutional dimensions into a unified framework, providing a more context-sensitive explanation of servant leadership processes. It offers the analytical foundation for interpreting the empirical findings presented in the subsequent section.

III. METHODOLOGY

➤ *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how servant leadership is constructed and enacted through faith-driven governance in community-centered contexts. A qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing meaning-making processes, moral reasoning, and lived experience that cannot be reduced to measurable variables (Creswell, 2007).

The design is particularly suited to addressing limitations in servant leadership research, which has been dominated by cross-sectional quantitative methods and offers limited insight into leadership formation processes (McQuade et al., 2021). By focusing on interpretive analysis, this study enables an in-depth understanding of how leadership values emerge, are articulated, and translated into governance practices.

Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, the study aims to develop a theoretically informed explanation of how faith, lived experience, and institutional context interact to shape leadership and its outcomes. This approach aligns with qualitative inquiry aimed at theory building through contextualized understanding (Creswell, 2007).

➤ *Data Source and Case Selection*

The empirical data consist of public leadership narratives derived from speeches delivered in open forums. Two informants were purposively selected based on their relevance to the research focus and their positions within governance structures:

- Informant 1: National-level leader (minister)
- Informant 2: Local-level leader (regent)

This selection enables cross-level comparison while maintaining a shared socio-cultural and institutional context.

Public speeches were chosen as the primary data source because they provide reflective and intentional accounts of leadership values, decision-making logic, and governance priorities. Such narratives are particularly relevant for examining faith-driven and moral dimensions of leadership, which are often explicitly articulated in public discourse.

➤ *Data Analysis Procedure*

The study employs a structured thematic analysis to systematically organize and interpret the data. The analytical process follows three sequential stages to ensure transparency and replicability (Creswell, 2007).

• *Open Coding*

The data were first transcribed and subjected to open coding to identify recurring themes. Codes were assigned to segments of text reflecting key elements such as faith-based reasoning, lived experience, empathy, and community engagement. This stage generated an initial set of analytical units grounded directly in the data.

• *Axial Coding*

The initial codes were then grouped into broader categories through axial coding. This process involved identifying relationships among codes and organizing them into higher-order categories aligned with the study's analytical focus. The resulting categories included faith-driven governance, embodied leadership, servant leadership practices, hybrid welfare governance, community well-being, and governance performance.

• *Data Integration*

In the final stage, the categories were integrated to construct a coherent analytical structure. This process involved mapping relationships across categories to identify patterns and linkages within the data. The outcome is a structured representation of how leadership is formed, enacted, and operationalized across different dimensions. A detailed coding structure is provided in Appendix A to ensure transparency and traceability of the analytical process.

➤ *Trustworthiness and Analytical Rigor*

To ensure the quality and validity of the findings, the study applies established criteria for trustworthiness in qualitative research, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and reflexivity (Creswell, 2007). Credibility is enhanced through cross-case comparison between two informants, allowing the identification of convergent and divergent patterns. This reduces reliance on a single narrative and strengthens interpretive validity.

Triangulation is achieved by examining consistency across multiple dimensions of the data, including faith, experience, and leadership practices. Patterns identified across both informants reinforce the robustness of the findings. Dependability is ensured through a systematic and transparent coding procedure. The use of structured coding stages enables a traceable, consistent analytical process.

Confirmability is maintained by grounding all interpretations in empirical data. Analytical claims are derived directly from the narratives rather than from the researcher's assumptions. Reflexivity is incorporated by acknowledging the interpretive nature of the analysis. The study recognizes that findings are constructed through engagement with the data, and care is taken to minimize subjective bias.

Additionally, coding reliability was strengthened through iterative coding and continuous comparison across data segments to ensure internal consistency in category development.

➤ *Ethical Considerations*

This study relies exclusively on publicly available data, namely speeches delivered in open forums. The use of such data does not involve private or sensitive information and is consistent with ethical standards for qualitative research (Creswell, 2007).

To maintain analytical neutrality, informants are anonymized as Informant 1 and Informant 2. This approach

ensures that the analysis focuses on leadership narratives rather than individual identities and minimizes potential bias associated with public status.

The data are interpreted as expressions of leadership meaning-making rather than as factual claims requiring verification, consistent with interpretive qualitative research.

➤ *Limitations of Methodology*

This study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the use of public speeches introduces the possibility of rhetorical framing. Leaders may construct narratives strategically; however, such narratives remain analytically valuable as they reveal how leadership is justified and articulated (McQuade et al., 2021).

Second, the limited number of informants restricts statistical generalizability. Nevertheless, this is consistent with qualitative research that prioritizes analytical depth and theoretical insight over representativeness (Trigoso-Yupari et al., 2025).

Third, the interpretive design does not establish causal relationships. Instead, it provides a process-oriented explanation of leadership formation, responding to critiques that servant leadership research lacks explanatory depth (Parris & Peachey, 2013).

Finally, the findings are context-specific to faith-driven and community-centered governance settings. While this limits direct transferability, it enables theoretical generalization by identifying mechanisms that may apply across similar socio-cultural contexts (Eva et al., 2019).

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

➤ *Faith as Governance Logic: From Moral Belief to Public Outcomes*

The findings demonstrate that faith, particularly tauhid, functions not only as a moral belief but as a governing logic that structures leadership reasoning and directly shapes governance outcomes. Informant 1 frames leadership as fundamentally accountable to a higher moral authority, emphasizing that mastery of both worldly and spiritual life must be grounded in knowledge. This orientation transforms leadership from an exercise of institutional authority into a form of moral responsibility, where decision-making is evaluated not solely based on efficiency or compliance, but on its alignment with broader ethical and societal obligations. In this sense, faith operates as a cognitive framework that guides leaders in interpreting social problems and prioritizing interventions that enhance community well-being (Puls, 2014).

This epistemic foundation becomes operational through a redefinition of leadership legitimacy. Informant 1 emphasizes that piety, rather than wealth or hierarchical position, determines worth. This reorientation shifts the basis of governance from material accumulation toward ethical

integrity, thereby reshaping policy priorities toward distributive justice and social responsibility. Such a transformation is significant because it directly influences how resources are allocated, how policies are designed, and how leadership is evaluated within society. By grounding legitimacy in moral values, leadership becomes more closely aligned with public expectations, which in turn strengthens trust and enhances governance performance.

The translation of this moral orientation into governance outcomes is evident in development initiatives. Informant 1 highlights programs that have increased rural income, demonstrating that faith-driven leadership can produce measurable improvements in economic well-being. This indicates that moral commitments are not confined to symbolic expressions but are operationalized through policy interventions that directly impact citizens' lives. In this way, faith-driven governance bridges the gap between ethical intention and material outcomes, reinforcing the argument that servant leadership contributes to both community well-being and governance effectiveness.

A complementary perspective emerges from Informant 2, who frames leadership explicitly in terms of problem-solving capacity. She emphasizes that leadership is meaningful when it delivers solutions for citizens, thereby defining governance performance in terms of tangible outcomes rather than procedural compliance. This perspective reinforces the idea that servant leadership must be evaluated based on its ability to produce public value, linking ethical orientation with service delivery and institutional effectiveness (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

However, Informant 2 also introduces an important tension by highlighting the complexity of governance processes. Her observation that political decision-making is not always linear reflects the reality that ethical intentions must be negotiated within institutional constraints. This suggests that while faith provides normative direction, governance performance depends on adaptive capacity and strategic decision-making. The effectiveness of servant leadership, therefore, lies in the alignment between moral orientation and institutional capability (Contreras, 2016).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that faith-driven leadership enhances community well-being and governance performance when moral principles are translated into context-sensitive policy action. This extends servant leadership theory by positioning faith as both an epistemic foundation and an operational governance logic.

➤ *Embodied Leadership: From Lived Hardship to Policy Sensitivity*

A second key finding reveals that lived experience functions as a central mechanism through which leadership becomes socially responsive and contextually grounded. Informant 1's narrative is characterized by repeated references to hardship, including limited access to basic infrastructure, long distances traveled for education, and reliance on informal labor for survival. These experiences are not presented merely as biographical background but as

formative conditions that shape leadership identity and orientation. Rather than being incidental, they serve as a cognitive and moral foundation through which social realities are understood and interpreted, thereby influencing leadership priorities toward addressing inequality and marginalization (McQuade et al., 2021).

This experiential foundation generates a sustained sensitivity to social conditions, which translates into leadership practices that prioritize the needs of disadvantaged communities. Informant 1 explicitly links his past experiences to current policy orientation, demonstrating how personal hardship informs decision-making processes. This connection produces a form of leadership that is not detached or technocratic but deeply embedded in lived realities, enabling leaders to design policies that are more aligned with the actual needs of citizens. In this sense, lived experience enhances the relevance and effectiveness of governance interventions, contributing directly to improved community well-being.

Importantly, these experiences are not only internalized but also actively reproduced in leadership practice. Informant 1 institutionalizes experiential learning by encouraging direct immersion in community conditions, ensuring that policymakers and officials are exposed to the realities faced by citizens. This practice transforms individual experience into a collective governance strategy, where empathy is cultivated through structured engagement with social contexts. Such an approach strengthens policy sensitivity by reducing the gap between decision-makers and beneficiaries, thereby enhancing both responsiveness and legitimacy in governance.

These findings challenge the conventional assumption that empathy is an inherent psychological trait. Instead, empathy emerges as a socially constructed capacity developed through interaction with lived realities. This form of empathy extends beyond interpersonal understanding and becomes structural empathy, characterized by an awareness of systemic inequalities and their underlying causes. Structural empathy enables leaders to interpret social problems not as isolated issues but as manifestations of broader structural conditions, leading to more targeted and effective policy interventions (McQuade et al., 2021).

A complementary pathway is observed in Informant 2's narrative, where empathy is shaped through strategic navigation of constraints rather than direct immersion. Her experiences of economic limitation and structural barriers inform a pragmatic leadership orientation focused on problem-solving and improving livelihoods. Unlike Informant 1, whose empathy emerges from immersion, Informant 2 demonstrates how empathy can develop through reflexive adaptation to challenging circumstances. This indicates that embodied leadership operates through multiple experiential pathways, each contributing to the formation of leadership sensitivity and responsiveness (Ayina, 2025).

The coexistence of these pathways suggests that embodied leadership is not a singular process but a dynamic

mechanism through which different forms of experience shape leadership behaviour. Experiential immersion produces deep contextual understanding, while strategic navigation fosters adaptive problem-solving capabilities. Together, these processes enhance the capacity of leaders to design policies that are both contextually relevant and practically effective. This dual mechanism strengthens the explanatory power of servant leadership by linking personal experience to governance outcomes in a systematic manner (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

From a governance perspective, the implications of embodied leadership are significant. By grounding leadership in lived experience, policies are more likely to reflect the realities of marginalized groups, thereby improving inclusivity and equity. This enhances community well-being by addressing structural inequalities and improving access to resources and opportunities. At the same time, it strengthens governance performance by increasing responsiveness, reducing policy misalignment, and improving the effectiveness of interventions.

Furthermore, the integration of lived experience into leadership practice contributes to the development of trust between leaders and communities. When leaders demonstrate an understanding of citizens' lived realities, their decisions are perceived as more legitimate and credible. This trust is a critical component of governance performance, as it facilitates cooperation, compliance, and social cohesion. In this way, embodied leadership not only improves policy outcomes but also strengthens the relational foundations of governance systems.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that embodied leadership provides a mechanism linking lived experience to empathy, policy sensitivity, and governance outcomes. By explaining how leadership is formed through experiential processes, this study addresses a key gap in servant leadership literature and advances a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of leadership. This perspective reinforces the argument that servant leadership contributes to community well-being and governance performance when it is grounded in the lived realities of the communities it serves.

➤ *Informal Welfare Institutions: From Values to Welfare Delivery*

The findings further demonstrate that servant leadership is not confined to interpersonal relations but becomes materially consequential when institutionalized through welfare systems. Informant 1's decision to prioritize the development of pesantren, rather than accumulating private assets, reflects a deliberate transformation of moral commitment into institutional action. This shift redefines leadership from individual virtue to collective infrastructure, where ethical values are embedded within organizational forms that directly serve community needs. In this context, well-being is not treated as an individual outcome but as a collective condition produced through sustained social intervention (Cissna et al., 2023).

Within this framework, pesantren functions as a hybrid welfare institution that integrates multiple roles, including education, social protection, and community support. It operates as an alternative governance mechanism capable of delivering services that are often insufficiently addressed by formal state institutions. By providing orphan care, facilitating access to education, and supporting vulnerable populations, pesantren translates moral orientation into structured welfare delivery. This institutionalization process is critical because it enables servant leadership to move beyond symbolic ethics toward tangible improvements in community well-being (Houston, 2023).

The role of pesantren also illustrates how informal institutions can complement and, in some cases, substitute for formal governance systems. In contexts where state capacity is uneven or limited, community-based institutions often assume responsibility for addressing social needs. Informant 1's emphasis on institutional development reflects an understanding that sustainable leadership requires organizational structures capable of delivering long-term social impact. This highlights the importance of institutionalizing leadership values to ensure continuity and scalability of interventions, thereby enhancing governance effectiveness.

This institutional dimension is reinforced by Informant 2's perspective, which emphasizes the role of formal governance structures in ensuring that citizens' needs are met. While her approach is situated within bureaucratic systems, it converges with Informant 1's emphasis on outcome-oriented leadership. Both perspectives prioritize social welfare as the central objective of governance, indicating that servant leadership operates across institutional boundaries. This convergence suggests that effective governance emerges from the interaction between formal and informal systems rather than from either system alone.

The interaction between these systems gives rise to what can be described as hybrid welfare governance. In this arrangement, informal institutions provide flexibility, local knowledge, and social legitimacy, while formal institutions offer regulatory authority, resources, and administrative coordination. This hybrid model enhances the capacity of governance systems to respond to complex social challenges by combining the strengths of both institutional forms. It also enables more context-sensitive interventions, as local institutions are better positioned to understand and address community-specific needs (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

From a governance perspective, the institutionalization of servant leadership significantly enhances service delivery outcomes. By embedding leadership values within organizational structures, welfare provision becomes more systematic and sustainable. This reduces reliance on individual leaders and ensures that social interventions can be maintained over time. As a result, community well-being is strengthened through improved access to services, increased social protection, and enhanced opportunities for economic and social development (Cissna et al., 2023).

At the same time, institutionalized leadership contributes to governance performance by improving coordination and legitimacy. When leadership values are translated into institutional practices, governance systems become more coherent and aligned with societal expectations. This alignment enhances trust between leaders and communities, which is essential for effective governance. Trust facilitates cooperation and compliance, thereby increasing the efficiency and impact of policy interventions (Thoha et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the presence of welfare institutions such as pesantren supports the redistribution of resources and opportunities within society. By prioritizing vulnerable populations, these institutions address structural inequalities and contribute to more inclusive development outcomes. This redistribution function is a key component of servant leadership, as it reflects a commitment to social justice and collective well-being. It also reinforces the legitimacy of leadership by demonstrating tangible benefits for marginalized groups (Houston, 2023).

The findings also suggest that institutionalization enhances resilience within governance systems. Informal welfare institutions are often more adaptable and responsive to changing conditions, allowing them to address emerging challenges more effectively than rigid bureaucratic structures. This adaptability is particularly important in contexts characterized by uncertainty and limited resources. By integrating flexibility with organizational capacity, hybrid welfare systems improve both the responsiveness and sustainability of governance (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that informal welfare institutions play a critical role in operationalizing servant leadership. By translating moral commitments into structured interventions, they enable leadership values to produce tangible social outcomes. This institutional dimension extends servant leadership theory by linking ethical orientation to governance delivery mechanisms. It also reinforces the argument that servant leadership contributes to community well-being and governance performance when it is embedded within organizational systems capable of delivering sustained social impact.

➤ *Anti-Elitist Leadership: Reconfiguring Power, Dignity, and Public Value*

A defining feature of the findings is the reconfiguration of power away from elite accumulation toward social service and collective welfare. Informant 1 explicitly rejects conventional markers of elite status, such as wealth, positional authority, and symbolic prestige, and instead emphasizes proximity to marginalized communities as the basis of leadership legitimacy. This orientation reflects a fundamental shift in how power is conceptualized, from an instrument of control and accumulation to a mechanism of service and redistribution. In this sense, leadership is not exercised to consolidate authority but to expand access to resources and opportunities, thereby directly contributing to community well-being.

This anti-elitist orientation is operationalized through practices that prioritize direct engagement with disadvantaged populations. Informant 1's emphasis on being physically and socially close to communities indicates a deliberate effort to reduce hierarchical distance between leaders and citizens. This proximity enables leaders to understand local conditions better and respond more effectively to social needs. As a result, leadership becomes more responsive and context-sensitive, enhancing governance performance through improved alignment between policy interventions and community realities (Thoha et al., 2025).

The rejection of elite accumulation also implies a redistribution logic within governance. By diverting resources away from personal gain and toward public welfare, leadership contributes to a more equitable distribution of benefits across society. This redistribution is not limited to material resources but also includes access to education, social services, and development opportunities. Such practices are particularly significant in contexts characterized by inequality, as they address structural disparities and promote inclusive growth. In this way, servant leadership functions as a mechanism for reducing inequality and enhancing collective well-being (Houston, 2023).

At a deeper level, this reconfiguration of power contributes to the restoration of dignity among marginalized groups. By prioritizing service and inclusion, leaders affirm the value of individuals who are often excluded from formal systems of power. This restoration of dignity is a critical dimension of community well-being, as it strengthens social cohesion and fosters a sense of belonging. When individuals feel recognized and supported, they are more likely to engage with governance processes, thereby enhancing participation and collective action.

However, the findings also reveal that the application of anti-elitist leadership is not without tension. Informant 2 introduces a more complex perspective by acknowledging the constraints inherent in political systems. Her observation that decision-making is not always linear reflects the reality that governance involves negotiation, compromise, and strategic calculation. This highlights the limits of idealized leadership models, as ethical intentions must be balanced with institutional realities and competing interests (Contreras, 2016).

This tension suggests that while anti-elitist values provide a normative foundation, effective leadership requires the ability to navigate complex governance environments. Informant 2 demonstrates how leaders can maintain a commitment to service while adapting to the practical demands of political decision-making. This adaptability is essential for translating ethical principles into actionable policies, as it enables leaders to operate within existing institutional constraints while pursuing social objectives.

The coexistence of these perspectives indicates that anti-elitist leadership operates along a continuum between normative ideals and pragmatic governance. Informant 1

represents a model grounded in moral conviction and direct service, while Informant 2 reflects a more adaptive approach that integrates ethical values with institutional strategy. Together, these perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding of how servant leadership functions in practice, highlighting the importance of balancing ideals with contextual realities (Contreras, 2016).

From a governance perspective, the reconfiguration of power has significant implications for legitimacy. When leadership is perceived as serving the public rather than elite interests, trust in governance systems increases. This trust enhances compliance, cooperation, and collective engagement, all of which are essential for effective governance. In this way, anti-elitist leadership contributes to governance performance by strengthening the relational foundations of authority (Thoha et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the redistribution of power and resources contributes to more inclusive governance outcomes. By prioritizing marginalized groups, leadership ensures that development benefits are more equitably distributed, thereby reducing social disparities. This inclusivity enhances the sustainability of governance systems, as it fosters broader support and reduces social tensions. It also aligns governance practices with ethical principles, reinforcing the legitimacy of leadership (Houston, 2023).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that anti-elitist leadership plays a critical role in linking servant leadership to community well-being and governance performance. By reconfiguring power as a tool for service and redistribution, leadership contributes to dignity restoration, social inclusion, and institutional legitimacy. This perspective extends servant leadership theory by incorporating power dynamics into its analytical framework, showing that ethical leadership involves not only relational practices but also structural transformations in how authority and resources are distributed within society.

➤ *Community-Centered Governance: Linking Leadership to Outcomes*

The findings demonstrate that servant leadership, when grounded in faith, embodied experience, and institutional practice, culminates in a model of community-centered governance that directly links leadership processes to societal outcomes. In this model, leadership decisions are not primarily guided by administrative efficiency or bureaucratic procedures, but by the imperative to address concrete social needs. This reorientation shifts the focus of governance from rule compliance to outcome effectiveness, where success is measured by the extent to which leadership improves the well-being of communities (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Community-centered governance is characterized by responsiveness to local conditions, inclusivity in decision-making, and alignment with the lived realities of citizens. Informant 2 explicitly frames leadership success in terms of the ability to provide solutions for societal problems, emphasizing that governance is meaningful when it produces tangible improvements in people's lives. This outcome-

oriented perspective reflects a fundamental departure from conventional public administration models, which often prioritize procedural correctness over substantive impact. By focusing on problem-solving and service delivery, servant leadership enhances both the relevance and effectiveness of governance systems.

At the same time, Informant 1 highlights the importance of targeting rural and marginalized communities as a central priority of leadership. His emphasis on improving village-level economies and expanding access to opportunities illustrates how servant leadership translates ethical commitment into concrete development initiatives. These practices demonstrate that leadership is most effective when it is directly connected to the needs of the most vulnerable populations. As a result, community well-being is enhanced not only through economic improvement but also through increased inclusion and social participation.

The integration of faith, experience, and institutional structures plays a critical role in enabling these outcomes. Faith provides the moral orientation guiding leadership priorities, while embodied experience ensures sensitivity to social conditions. Institutional mechanisms, such as pesantren and welfare systems, translate these orientations into structured interventions. The interaction of these elements creates a governance system that is both ethically grounded and operationally effective, allowing leadership values to be realized in practice (Cissna et al., 2023).

From a well-being perspective, the outcomes of this governance model extend beyond material indicators to include relational and socio-political dimensions. Community well-being is reflected in dignity restoration, social inclusion, and trust between citizens and leaders. These dimensions are critical because they shape how individuals experience governance and their willingness to engage with it. When leadership is perceived as responsive and ethically grounded, it fosters a sense of belonging and collective responsibility, thereby strengthening social cohesion (Thoha et al., 2025).

In addition to enhancing well-being, this model of governance also improves performance outcomes. Governance performance is reflected in responsiveness to community needs, legitimacy of decision-making processes, and effectiveness in delivering services. By aligning leadership practices with societal expectations, servant leadership reduces the gap between policy design and implementation, thereby increasing the impact of governance interventions. This alignment is particularly important in contexts where formal systems may lack the flexibility to respond to local conditions (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

The findings further indicate that community-centered governance enhances trust, which serves as a key mechanism linking leadership to performance. Trust enables cooperation between citizens and institutions, facilitating the implementation of policies and programs. When communities trust their leaders, they are more likely to participate in governance processes and support collective initiatives. This

dynamic creates a positive feedback loop in which trust strengthens governance performance, which in turn reinforces trust.

Moreover, the focus on community-centered outcomes contributes to the sustainability of governance systems. By addressing root causes of social problems and promoting inclusive development, servant leadership reduces the likelihood of conflict and instability. This long-term perspective is essential for maintaining governance effectiveness, as it ensures that interventions produce lasting benefits rather than temporary solutions. In this sense, servant leadership supports not only immediate outcomes but also the resilience of governance systems over time (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

The findings also highlight the importance of integrating local knowledge into governance processes. Community-centered leadership draws on the insights and experiences of citizens, enabling more accurate identification of needs and more effective design of interventions. This participatory approach enhances both the legitimacy and effectiveness of governance, as policies are more closely aligned with the realities of those they affect. It also reinforces the role of leadership as a facilitator of collective action rather than a top-down authority (Thoha et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that servant leadership contributes to community well-being and governance performance through a process of integration across moral, experiential, and institutional dimensions. By aligning ethical values with practical interventions, leadership becomes a driver of both social and governance outcomes. This perspective extends servant leadership theory by explicitly linking it to public governance and community development, thereby addressing a key gap in the literature and reinforcing its relevance in diverse socio-cultural contexts.

➤ *Collective Servant Leadership and System Capacity*

A final empirical insight concerns the transformation of leadership from an individual-centered model toward a collective and system-oriented approach. Informant 1 explicitly rejects the notion of the “superman” leader, emphasizing instead that leadership effectiveness depends on collaboration and the collective capacity of teams. This perspective challenges traditional leadership paradigms that prioritize individual authority and charisma, and instead positions leadership as a relational and distributed process. In this framework, leadership is not defined by the exceptional qualities of a single individual but by the ability to mobilize and coordinate multiple actors toward shared objectives, thereby enhancing governance effectiveness.

This shift toward collective leadership is operationalized through practices that prioritize teamwork, knowledge sharing, and mutual accountability. Informant 1 highlights the importance of building collaborative environments in which individuals contribute their expertise and work together to address complex societal challenges. Such an approach recognizes that contemporary governance

problems—such as poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, cannot be resolved by individual leaders alone. Instead, they require coordinated action across different sectors and levels of governance, making collaboration a critical component of leadership effectiveness.

Informant 2 reinforces this perspective by emphasizing continuous learning and institutional collaboration as key elements of leadership. She highlights the importance of partnerships between government, educational institutions, and community organizations in enhancing governance capacity. These partnerships enable the integration of diverse knowledge systems and resources, allowing for more comprehensive and context-sensitive solutions. By fostering collaboration across institutional boundaries, leadership contributes to the development of governance systems that are more adaptive, inclusive, and capable of addressing complex challenges.

The transition from individual to collective leadership also enhances system capacity by distributing responsibility across multiple actors. In contrast to centralized leadership models, where decision-making authority is concentrated, collective leadership allows for more flexible and responsive governance. This distribution of authority reduces bottlenecks in decision-making processes and enables faster responses to emerging issues. As a result, governance systems become more efficient and effective in delivering services and addressing societal needs (Thoha et al., 2025).

From a well-being perspective, collective leadership contributes to stronger community engagement and social cohesion. When leadership is distributed and inclusive, individuals are more likely to feel involved in governance processes, fostering a sense of ownership and participation. This engagement enhances community well-being by strengthening social networks and promoting collaborative problem-solving. It also reinforces trust between citizens and institutions, which is essential for sustainable governance (Thoha et al., 2025).

At the same time, collective leadership improves governance performance by enhancing coordination across institutions. Complex policy challenges often require the integration of multiple sectors, including government agencies, civil society organizations, and community groups. By facilitating coordination among these actors, servant leadership ensures that policies are implemented more effectively and resources are utilized more efficiently. This coordination reduces fragmentation within governance systems and enhances the overall impact of interventions (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

The findings also suggest that collective leadership supports innovation within governance systems. By bringing together diverse perspectives and expertise, collaborative leadership creates opportunities for creative problem-solving and the development of new approaches to social challenges. This capacity for innovation is particularly important in rapidly changing environments, where traditional solutions may no longer be effective. Through collaboration, leadership

enables governance systems to adapt and evolve in response to emerging needs (Thoha et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the emphasis on teamwork aligns with the core principles of servant leadership, particularly the focus on empowering others and fostering their development. By prioritizing the growth and participation of team members, leaders create environments in which individuals are encouraged to contribute and take initiative. This empowerment enhances both individual and collective capacity, strengthening the overall effectiveness of governance systems (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

The shift toward collective leadership also reinforces the sustainability of governance outcomes. Unlike individual-centered models, which may be dependent on specific leaders, collective approaches create systems that can continue to function effectively even in the absence of particular individuals. This institutional resilience is critical for maintaining long-term governance performance and ensuring continuity in service delivery. By embedding leadership within teams and institutions, servant leadership contributes to more stable and sustainable governance systems (Thoha et al., 2025).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the transition from “one man show” leadership to “super team” leadership is a critical component of servant leadership in governance contexts. By emphasizing collaboration, coordination, and collective capacity, leadership becomes a systemic phenomenon that enhances both community well-being and governance performance. This perspective extends servant leadership theory by highlighting its role in shaping not only individual behaviour but also the structure and functioning of governance systems.

➤ *Synthesis: Reconstructing Servant Leadership as a Multi-Level Governance Logic*

The findings enable a theoretical reconstruction of servant leadership as a multi-level governance logic, shifting the analytical focus from behavioural description to the underlying generative structure of leadership. This reconstruction addresses a central limitation in existing literature, which has predominantly focused on observable leadership behaviours without sufficiently explaining how such behaviours emerge or how they are sustained across contexts (Eva et al., 2019).

At the epistemic level, the study shows that faith functions as a foundational structure shaping leadership cognition and decision-making processes. Rather than treating ethics as an outcome of leadership, the findings indicate that moral belief systems precede and generate leadership orientations. This shifts the analytical focus from behavioural manifestations to underlying cognitive structures, thereby extending servant leadership theory beyond its dominant descriptive paradigm. By positioning faith as an epistemic foundation, the study responds to calls for greater conceptual clarity and theoretical depth in servant leadership research (Puls, 2014).

At the experiential level, the concept of embodied leadership provides a mechanism explaining how empathy is formed and operationalized. The findings demonstrate that empathy emerges through lived experiences of hardship and social struggle, resulting in a form of structural empathy that enables leaders to understand and address systemic inequalities. This process-oriented perspective advances servant leadership theory by linking personal experience to leadership behaviour, thereby addressing the lack of explanatory mechanisms identified in prior research (McQuade et al., 2021).

At the institutional level, the study highlights the role of hybrid welfare systems in operationalizing leadership values. Informal institutions such as *pesantren* function as governance mechanisms that translate moral commitments into structured interventions. This institutional dimension is critical, as it explains how leadership moves beyond individual intention to produce tangible outcomes. By integrating institutional analysis into servant leadership theory, the study addresses the absence of frameworks linking leadership with organizational and governance structures (Cissna et al., 2023).

At the structural level, the findings reveal that servant leadership involves a reconfiguration of power relations. Leadership is redefined as a mechanism of service and redistribution rather than control and accumulation. This shift contributes to dignity restoration, social inclusion, and the redistribution of resources, thereby addressing structural inequalities. By incorporating power dynamics into the analysis, the study extends servant leadership theory beyond relational and ethical dimensions to include broader socio-political implications.

At the systemic level, the transition from individual to collective leadership demonstrates that servant leadership operates as a distributed and relational phenomenon. The emphasis on collaboration and coordination enhances system capacity, enabling governance systems to respond more effectively to complex challenges. This perspective highlights the importance of collective action and institutional integration in achieving sustainable outcomes, thereby expanding the scope of servant leadership to include system-level processes.

These dimensions converge at the outcome level, where servant leadership contributes to both community well-being and governance performance. Community well-being is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing dignity, trust, and social inclusion, while governance performance is reflected in responsiveness, legitimacy, and effectiveness. The integration of these outcomes demonstrates that servant leadership has implications that extend beyond organizational settings to broader societal contexts (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Taken together, these findings support a process-oriented and context-sensitive model of servant leadership in which leadership emerges through the interaction of epistemic, experiential, institutional, and structural factors.

This model addresses a key gap in the literature by connecting antecedents, mechanisms, and outcomes within a unified analytical framework. It also provides a more comprehensive explanation of how servant leadership operates in practice, particularly in non-Western and community-based governance contexts (Eva et al., 2019).

Importantly, this reconstruction challenges the implicit assumption that servant leadership is universally applicable without contextual adaptation. The findings demonstrate that leadership practices are shaped by socio-cultural and institutional environments, suggesting that servant leadership must be understood as a contextually embedded phenomenon. This insight has significant implications for the generalizability of existing theories, as it highlights the need to incorporate contextual variables into leadership analysis (Roberts, 2018).

Furthermore, the integration of faith, experience, and institutional practice reveals that servant leadership is not merely a normative ideal but a practical governance framework. By linking moral values to policy implementation and institutional coordination, the study demonstrates how leadership can produce tangible societal outcomes. This practical orientation addresses critiques that servant leadership lacks applicability, providing evidence of its relevance in real-world governance settings (Houston, 2023).

The study also contributes to ongoing debates regarding the relationship between servant leadership and spiritual leadership. While prior research suggests overlap between these constructs, the findings indicate that faith operates as a foundational logic rather than a parallel dimension. This distinction clarifies the conceptual boundaries of servant leadership and reinforces its theoretical independence while acknowledging its connection to broader spiritual frameworks (Contreras, 2016).

From a theoretical perspective, the proposed framework offers three key contributions. First, it introduces an epistemic dimension that explains how leadership is grounded in moral belief systems. Second, it provides a mechanism-based explanation through embodied leadership, linking experience to empathy and action. Third, it expands the scope of servant leadership to include institutional and governance dimensions, thereby connecting leadership theory with public administration and development studies.

Rather than extending servant leadership incrementally, this study re-specifies its analytical core by integrating epistemic foundations, experiential mechanisms, institutional structures, and systemic outcomes into a unified explanatory framework. By moving beyond behavioural descriptions toward a process-oriented framework, the study advances servant leadership theory and provides a foundation for future research. More importantly, it demonstrates that servant leadership has the potential to address complex societal challenges by aligning moral commitment with institutional capacity and governance performance.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

➤ Conclusion

This study examines how servant leadership is constructed and enacted through faith-driven governance in community-centered contexts, providing an empirically grounded account of leadership formation and its societal implications. By examining faith-driven governance in community-centered contexts, the findings directly address persistent concerns regarding conceptual fragmentation and the absence of integrative frameworks in servant leadership research (Eva et al., 2019).

First, the study establishes that faith, particularly the principle of *tauhid*, functions as an epistemic foundation shaping how leaders interpret responsibility, evaluate decisions, and define success. This moves beyond treating ethics as behavioural outcomes by showing that moral orientation is constitutive of leadership reasoning itself (Puls, 2014).

Second, the findings demonstrate that empathy is not an inherent trait but an outcome of embodied experience. Lived encounters with hardship generate structural empathy that enhances leaders' sensitivity to inequality and strengthens the alignment between policy interventions and community needs (McQuade et al., 2021).

Third, the study shows that servant leadership becomes operationally effective when embedded within institutional arrangements, particularly informal welfare systems such as *pesantren*. These institutions translate leadership values into concrete social interventions, linking ethical orientation to welfare delivery and governance outcomes (Cissna et al., 2023).

Fourth, the findings reveal a reconfiguration of power in which leadership shifts from accumulation to redistribution and from individual authority to collective capacity. Anti-elitist and collaborative practices enable leaders to enhance both community well-being and governance performance by prioritizing public value, inclusivity, and responsiveness (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Taken together, these elements form an integrated framework in which faith, embodied experience, institutional practice, and power reconfiguration interact to produce community-centered governance outcomes. Community well-being emerges as a multidimensional construct encompassing dignity, trust, and social inclusion, while governance performance is reflected in responsiveness, legitimacy, and the capacity to deliver context-sensitive solutions (Thoha et al., 2025).

Overall, the study demonstrates how leadership processes translate into community-level outcomes, highlighting the role of moral orientation, lived experience, and institutional practice in shaping both well-being and governance performance.

➤ Theoretical Implications

This study makes four interrelated theoretical contributions that directly address core limitations in servant leadership literature.

First, it provides an epistemic extension by positioning faith as a foundational moral-cognitive structure rather than a contextual variable. This shifts the analytical focus from observable behaviour to underlying belief systems, addressing long-standing concerns regarding construct clarity and theoretical depth (Eva et al., 2019; Puls, 2014).

Second, it offers a mechanism-based contribution through the concept of embodied leadership. By explaining how empathy emerges from lived experience, the study advances a process-oriented understanding of servant leadership, moving beyond static trait-based models toward dynamic accounts of leadership formation (McQuade et al., 2021).

Third, it delivers a contextual expansion by situating servant leadership within informal and community-based governance systems. This extends the scope of servant leadership beyond organizational settings to public governance and development contexts, particularly in the Global South (Roberts, 2018).

Fourth, it introduces a structural-institutional extension by demonstrating how servant leadership is operationalized through welfare institutions, redistributive practices, and collaborative governance mechanisms. This repositions servant leadership as a multi-level framework linking individual values, institutional arrangements, and societal outcomes (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Taken together, these contributions reposition servant leadership as a multi-dimensional and integrative theory, connecting epistemic foundations, experiential processes, and institutional dynamics. This directly responds to calls for theoretically grounded and context-sensitive frameworks while strengthening its explanatory power in relation to community well-being and governance performance (Thoha et al., 2025).

➤ Practical Implications

The findings translate into actionable implications for leadership development and public governance.

First, leadership development programs should incorporate moral-cognitive formation and experiential learning, not only technical competencies. Structured exposure to community realities can cultivate structural empathy and improve leaders' capacity to design context-sensitive policies (McQuade et al., 2021).

Second, policymakers should recognize and institutionalize collaboration with informal welfare systems. Community-based and faith-driven institutions play a critical role in delivering social protection and building trust, and their integration can enhance both effectiveness and legitimacy (Cissna et al., 2023).

Third, governance systems should adopt community-centered and participatory approaches that prioritize responsiveness to local needs. Embedding local knowledge into decision-making processes improves policy relevance and strengthens social cohesion (Thoha et al., 2025).

Fourth, public leadership should shift toward collaborative and network-based governance models. Moving from individual authority to collective capacity enhances coordination and improves the sustainability of governance outcomes (Awasthi & Walumbwa, 2022).

Finally, governance performance frameworks should incorporate well-being indicators, such as dignity, inclusion, and trust, alongside traditional efficiency metrics, providing a more comprehensive assessment of leadership effectiveness.

➤ *Limitations and Future Research*

This study has several limitations that open important avenues for future research. First, the analysis is based on qualitative interpretation of public leadership narratives, which may reflect rhetorical positioning. Future research could enhance empirical depth through ethnographic observation, policy analysis, or mixed-method designs (McQuade et al., 2021).

Second, the study is contextually situated within faith-driven governance in Indonesia. Comparative research across different cultural, institutional, and religious settings is needed to assess the broader applicability of the proposed framework (Roberts, 2018).

Third, while the study develops an integrative conceptual model, the relationships remain analytically derived. Future studies should employ quantitative and longitudinal designs to test causal mechanisms and evaluate long-term governance outcomes (Trigoso-Yupari et al., 2025).

Fourth, further research is needed to deepen the integration between servant leadership, spirituality, and governance systems through interdisciplinary approaches that bridge leadership theory and public administration (Houston, 2023).

➤ *Final Reflection*

Servant leadership has often been framed as a moral aspiration; this study demonstrates that its transformative potential lies in its capacity to structure how leadership is formed, enacted, and sustained within real governance contexts.

By uncovering the interplay between faith, lived experience, and institutional practice, the study shows that leadership effectiveness depends not only on ethical intent but on the ability to embed values within systems that deliver collective outcomes. In this sense, leadership becomes consequential when it reshapes how resources are distributed, how decisions are made, and how communities experience governance.

This perspective moves servant leadership beyond normative discourse toward an explanatory and practice-oriented framework, offering a way to understand how leadership can operate as a driver of both social transformation and institutional performance in complex societal settings.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, Agus F. Abdillah; methodology, Doni Sugianto Sihotang; software, Doni Sugianto Sihotang; validation, Agus F. Abdillah and Sarah Diba Hidayat; formal analysis, Agus F. Abdillah and Sarah Diba Hidayat; writing original draft preparation, Agus F. Abdillah; writing review and editing, Doni Sugianto Sihotang. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

The APC was funded by the authors.

Data Availability Statement

Data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. No publicly archived datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors acknowledge administrative and technical support provided by Agung Putra University. During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Notebook LM (version June 2026) for text synthesis and refinement. The authors have reviewed and edited the output and take full responsibility for the content of this publication.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. The authors are fully responsible for the design of the study; in the collection, analysis, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript; and the decision to publish the results.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Awasthi, P., & Walumbwa, F. O. (2022). Antecedents and consequences of servant leadership in local governance: Evidence from three case studies. *Public Administration Review*. ISSN: 00333352 Volume: 82 Issue: 6 Pages: 1077 - 1094. Article2022EID: 2-s2.0-85139454043.
- [2]. Ayina, D. R. (2025). Lived faith in the practice of Christian leaders. In *Spirituality for Leaders: Theoretical Insights and Practical Tools*. Pages: 52 - 56, Book Chapter2025, EID: 2-s2.0-105026641729
- [3]. Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- [4]. Cissna, K., Dern, G., Gross, C., & Wickramasinghe, A. (2023). A servant leader's guide to maximizing the potential of diverse teams: A model for leadership development. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Servant Leadership*. Volume: 1, Pages: 423 - 441, Book Chapter, 2023EID: 2-s2.0-85196440674
- [5]. Coetzer, M. F., Bussin, M., & Geldenhuys, M. (2017). The functions of a servant leader. *Administrative Sciences*, 7(1), 5. <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci7010005>
- [6]. Contreras, T. F. (2016). Servant and spiritual leadership theories: Are they two different notions? *Journal of Human Values*, 22(3), Pages: 202 - 208, EID: 2-s2.0-84987720593
- [7]. Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 111–132, EID: 2-s2.0-85050658228
- [8]. Giolito, V. J., Liden, R. C., van Dierendonck, D., & Cheung, G. W. (2021). Servant leadership influencing store-level profit: The mediating effect of employee flourishing. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 172(3), 503–524. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-020-04509-1>
- [9]. Heine, E. C. E., Stouten, J., & Liden, R. C. (2023). Providing service during a merger: The role of organizational goal clarity and servant leadership. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 184(3), 627–647. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05162-6>
- [10]. Houston, T. (2023). Servant leadership: Practices, experiences, and effective ways to mitigate barriers. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Servant Leadership*. Volume: 2Pages: 1307 - 1325. Book Chapter. EID: 2-s2.0-85196453487
- [11]. Lemoine, G. J., Eva, N., Smallfield, J., Hartnell, C. A., & Meuser, J. D. (2025). Fortifying servant leadership's foundations: Five core questions to guide future research. *Group & Organization Management*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10596011251376461>
- [12]. McQuade, K. E., Harrison, C., & Tarbert, H. (2021). Systematically reviewing servant leadership. *European Business Review*. Volume: 33, Issue: 3, Pages: 465 - 490, EID: 2-s2.0-85091463951
- [13]. Parris, D. L., & Peachey, J. W. (2013). A systematic literature review of servant leadership theory in organizational contexts. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 113(3), 377–393, EID: 2-s2.0-84876447485
- [14]. Puls, T. R. (2014). The impact of faith on servant leadership and leadership behaviour. In *Human Rights and Ethics: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications*, Volume: 2Pages: 975 - 994, Book Chapter.
- [15]. Roberts, G. E. (2018). Servant leadership across cultures. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Workplace Spirituality and Fulfillment*, Volume: 1-2Pages: 271 - 299, Book Chapter, EID: 2-s2.0-85063040452
- [16]. Thoha, A. F. K., Mayudi, G., Handriana, T., & Ekowati, D. (2025). Ethical leadership in religious institutions: Fostering social cohesion in a multicultural Indonesian community. *International Journal of Ethics and Systems*, ISSN: 25149369, Article, EID: 2-s2.0-105014952890
- [17]. Trigoso-Yupari, R. M., & Gago-Chávez, J. D. J. S. (2025). Advances, gaps, and future directions in servant leadership research: A systematic state-of-the-art review. *Proceedings of the LACCEI International Multi-Conference for Engineering, Education and Technology*, ISSN: 24146390, Conference Paper, EID: 2-s2.0-105032413218
- [18]. van Dierendonck, D., Xiu, L., & Lv, F. (2023). Servant leadership measurement: A comparison of five instruments in China. *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 44(3), 305–316. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LODJ-03-2022-0153>.

APPENDIX**➤ Appendix A. Coding Structure and Analytical Process****Table A1. Sample Coding Framework and Analytical Development**

No	Data Excerpt (Verbatim)	Open Code	Axial Category	Selective Theme	Analytical Interpretation
1	“Whoever seeks success in this world and the hereafter must do so through knowledge.” (Informant 1)	dual success orientation; knowledge as guidance	faith-based epistemic orientation	Faith as governance logic	Leadership is grounded in moral-cognitive belief systems that shape decision-making.
2	“The most noble person is the most pious.” (Informant 1)	moral hierarchy; piety over status	non-material legitimacy	Anti-elitist leadership	Leadership legitimacy is derived from moral integrity rather than position or wealth.
3	“We must understand how people live before we make policies.” (Informant 1)	experiential immersion; field exposure	embodied experience	Embodied leadership	Direct exposure to social conditions shapes policy sensitivity and empathy.
4	“When we can solve people’s problems, that is the happiness of a leader.” (Informant 2)	problem-solving orientation; outcome-based leadership	pragmatic governance orientation	Community-centered governance	Leadership success is defined by tangible outcomes for citizens.
5	“In politics, one plus one is not always two.” (Informant 2)	non-linearity; decision complexity	contextual adaptation	Power and governance realism	Leadership involves negotiation and adaptation within institutional constraints.
6	“We build institutions that serve the community, not ourselves.” (Informant 1)	collective orientation; anti-accumulation	institutionalized service	Informal welfare institutions	Leadership values are embedded into institutional structures for long-term impact.
7	“Pesantren must support the poor and provide access to education.” (Informant 1)	social welfare; education access	hybrid welfare provision	Institutional governance	Informal institutions function as welfare delivery systems.
8	“We collaborate with universities and communities to improve policy.” (Informant 2)	collaboration; partnership	collective governance	Super team leadership	Governance effectiveness depends on coordination across actors.
9	“I experienced hardship growing up, and that shapes how I see people.” (Informant 1)	lived hardship; personal struggle	experiential empathy formation	Embodied leadership	Empathy emerges from lived experience, not abstract values.
10	“Policies must reflect what people actually need.” (Informant 2)	needs-based policy	responsiveness	Governance performance	Leadership effectiveness depends on alignment with community needs.

Table A2. Iterative Coding and Category Refinement

Stage	Initial Code	Revised Code	Reason for Revision
Stage 1	knowledge as education	knowledge as a moral-epistemic foundation	broader meaning beyond technical knowledge
Stage 1	helping people	structural empathy	reflects systemic understanding, not individual charity
Stage 2	leadership values	governance logic	captures decision-making implications
Stage 2	social service	institutional welfare delivery	links values to organizational structures

Table A3. Cross-Case Comparison (Informant 1 vs Informant 2)

Dimension	Informant 1	Informant 2	Integrated Insight
Faith	transcendental, moral foundation	pragmatic, outcome-oriented	faith operates at cognitive and practical levels
Experience	Hardship - immersion	constraint - adaptation	empathy formed through multiple pathways
Leadership	moral authority	strategic governance	Leadership combines values and pragmatism
Outcome	community empowerment	service delivery	convergence toward community well-being

Table A4. Triangulation Across Data Dimensions

Dimension	Evidence Source	Analytical Role
Faith	moral statements, religious framing	epistemic foundation
Experience	hardship narratives, life history	mechanism of empathy
Practice	policy orientation, institutional action	operationalization
Outcome	welfare impact, governance performance	validation of leadership effectiveness