Leadership in an African context

Sylvie Kwedi Nolna, PhD

Background

- Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is worse off in terms of health indicators than any other region of the world, and suffers badly from the 10/90 gap, whereby 90% of the world's investment in health research addresses only 10% of the global health problems.

The African research landscape

- Researchers are a scarce resource in Africa.

- According to UNESCO, the global average of researchers per million inhabitants is **1,478** (2015).

- In **SSA,** the average is fewer than **50** researchers per million inhabitants.

- Senegal (550) and South Africa (494) have the highest numbers of researchers per million inhabitants in SSA
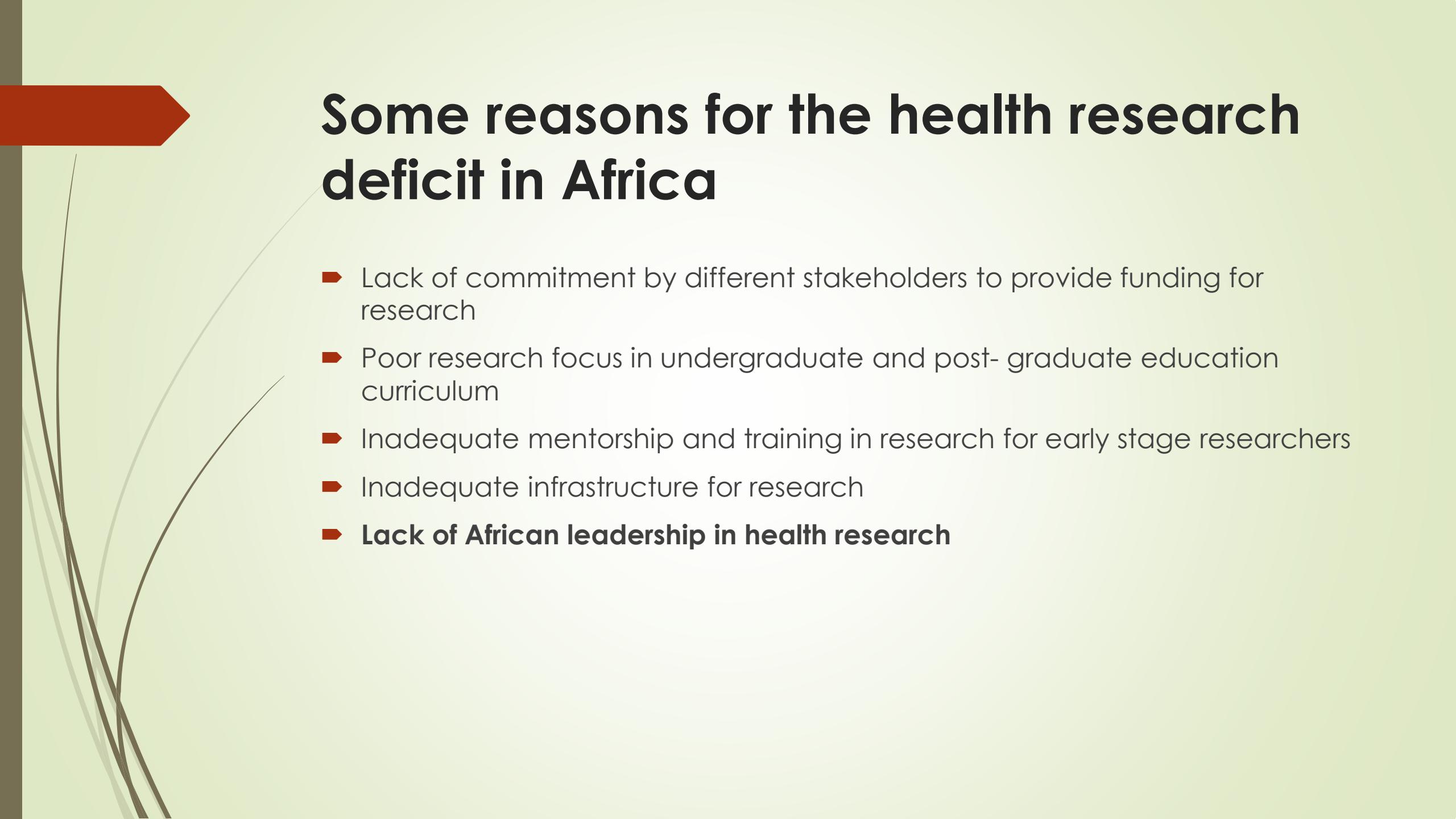
Some reasons for the health research deficit in Africa

- Lack of commitment by different stakeholders to provide funding for research

- Poor research focus in undergraduate and post- graduate education curriculum

- Inadequate mentorship and training in research for early stage researchers

- Inadequate infrastructure for research

- **Lack of African leadership in health research**

What does research leadership look like?

- Research leadership goes beyond generic leadership concerns (such as with vision and strategy) to encompass issues specific to the research ecosystem;

- A researcher needs to also be concerned with building linkages with policy makers, being an effective ambassador for science, and engaging with other communities to influence research and its resourcing.

- Strong leadership will catalyze researchers, teams and institutions to be more successful.

What does research leadership look like?

- Top research leaders are at the forefront of their field in terms of publication quality and number, attract large research grants, supervise and mentor graduate students and successfully implement large-scale research programs.

- They are further distinguished by translating their research findings into outputs that benefit communities and other stakeholders, such as policy that addresses real world challenges or intellectual property developed into products and services.

- At the highest levels, research leaders play a central role in influencing, transforming and strengthening institutional, national and international research systems.

Leadership in the African context

- Leadership cannot be understood independent of context.

- African countries are rich in tribal tradition and culture and the African work environment often display hierarchical tendencies.

- The combination of past linkages, traditions, and indigenous habits creates unique leadership styles that are distinctly African.

African perspectives on leadership

- It cannot be assumed that leadership as perceived in the global North is applicable in Africa.

- Cultural influences in leadership styles and preferences impact leadership in Africa, and so consideration of leadership pathways includes existing cultural beliefs and practices.

African perspectives on leadership

- Common or most admired styles of leadership in Africa are value-based, team-orientated and participative.

- Consultative leadership that pursues public or communal goals gains wide approval.

- Charismatic, aspirational or visionary leadership and a sense of patriotism feature strongly in these characterizations.

- Pursuing goals related to community service and not self-serving is seen to require self-awareness of leadership capacities and a relations- oriented style of leadership.

African Perspectives on leadership

- Some researchers go further to suggest that African leadership is conceptualized differently; that it is communally constructed rather than focused on the individual.

- In a survey of African research leaders and team members, the most favored leadership style was found to be relations-oriented rather than democratic/participative.

- Other leadership styles found by the same study to be **less** favored were paternalistic leadership, laissez-faire leadership and task-orientated leadership.
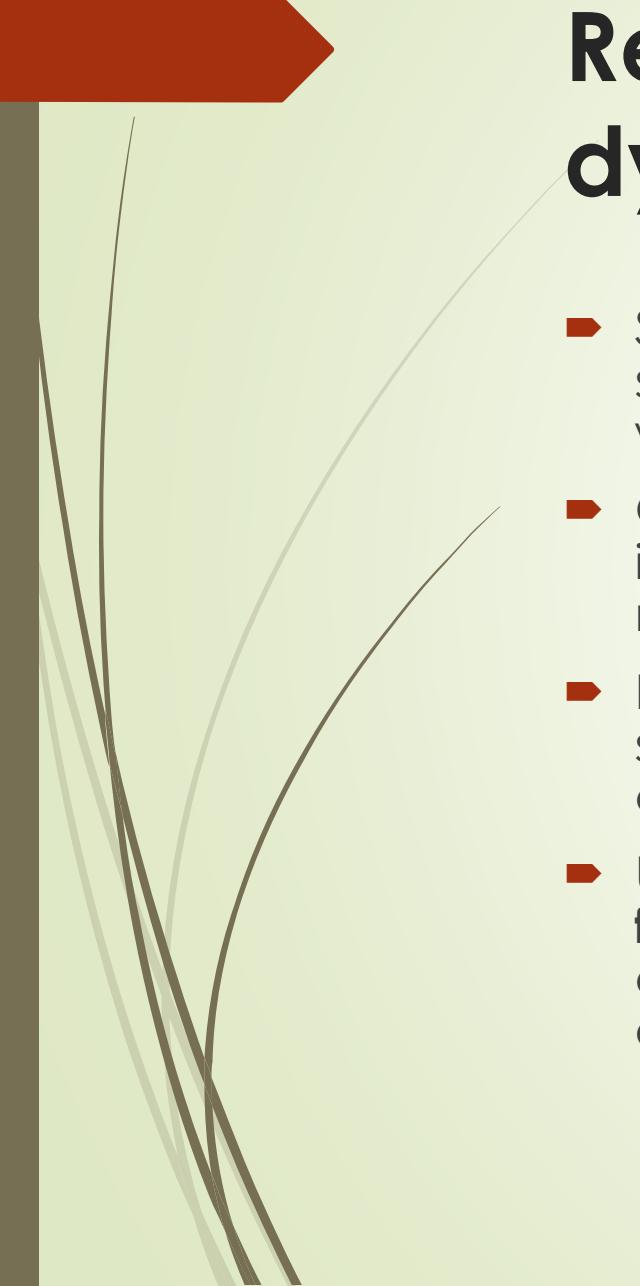
Research leadership and gender dynamics

- Social roles such as mother, wife, care giver, family member (daughter, sister, child), community member, and friend weigh heavily on African women researchers.

- Gender-sensitive policies and incentives for women researchers seem to be in place, but appear to be rare at institutional level, as do effective talent management practices.

- Factors such as discriminatory employment practices and cultural and social expectations that women put **home and family before** career considerations impede the development of talented women researchers.

- Uptake of externally **funded opportunities for women is lower numbers than for men** which is linked to lower self-belief that research leadership is attainable, impeded by obligations towards home and family as well as employment barriers.

African perspectives on leadership

24 African countries were represented, across a wide geographical spread but concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, as shown in figure 3. The highest responses were received from Nigeria (51), Kenya (42) and South Africa (38), followed by Uganda (21) and Tanzania (20).

- ➤ The Wellcome Trust (Wellcome) and the African Academy of Sciences (AAS) commissioned a study to explore the landscape of research leadership across Africa.

African countries where respondents were working
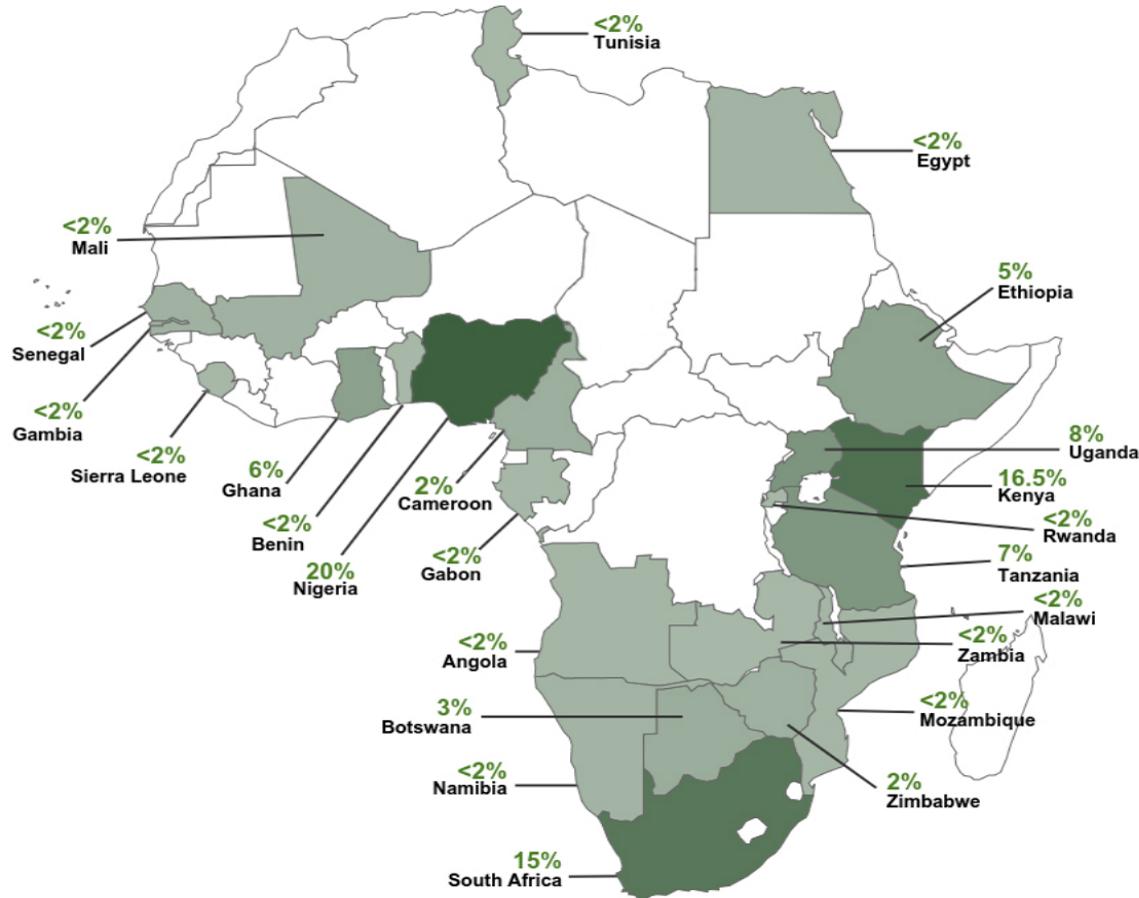
African Perspectives on leadership

- Analysis of the **Wellcome and AAS** study led to the development a new model for research leadership.

- The model balances research expertise, functional skills and relational competencies, and that is inclusive for both men and women researchers in Africa.

Figure 9 A competency model for African research leadership

Africa, a significant yet untapped potential for health research

- Africa has been described as "the hopeful continent",

- Data from the World Bank further supports that Africa is becoming an important partner in the global economy.

- Driving its potential, Africa covers 30 million square kilometers and includes more than a billion people.

- The continent is incredibly diverse, with more than 50 countries, 3000 different ethnicities, and 2,000 languages.

- The number of youthful working-age population is growing rapidly in Africa. In **2019**, **around 226 million youth aged 15-24 lived in Africa**, representing **19% of the global youth population.**

- It is expected that the number of youth will increase by **42% in 2030**.

- Without effective leadership, Africa will never be able to overcome its challenges, achieve its full potential, and protect itself from environmental and human exploitation.

An example of an "African brand" of leadership - Ubuntu

- An "African brand" of leadership would include, for instance, concepts that incorporate cultural diversity recognizing the potential challenge posed by the diverse customs and cultural practices.

- *Ubuntu* means **"humanity"** and at the heart of this emerges the idea that **"an individual learns to be a person through other people."**

- The word Ubuntu was popularized by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela in the 1990's as they compared apartheid, which means literally to be "separate" to Ubuntu, which in the African conception states that "persons depend on persons to be persons."

An example of an "African brand" of leadership - Ubuntu

- **"It is by belonging to the community that we become ourselves."**
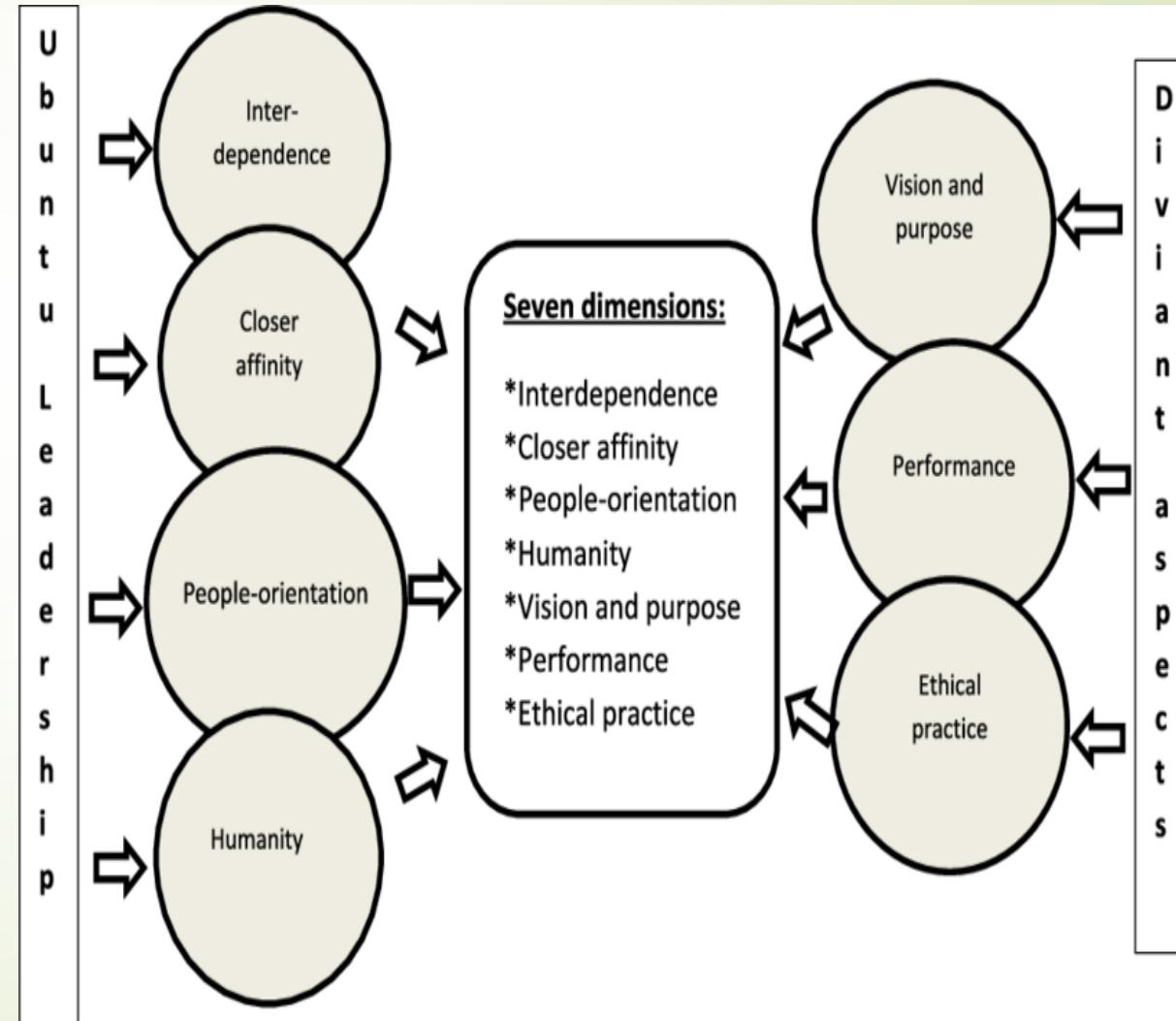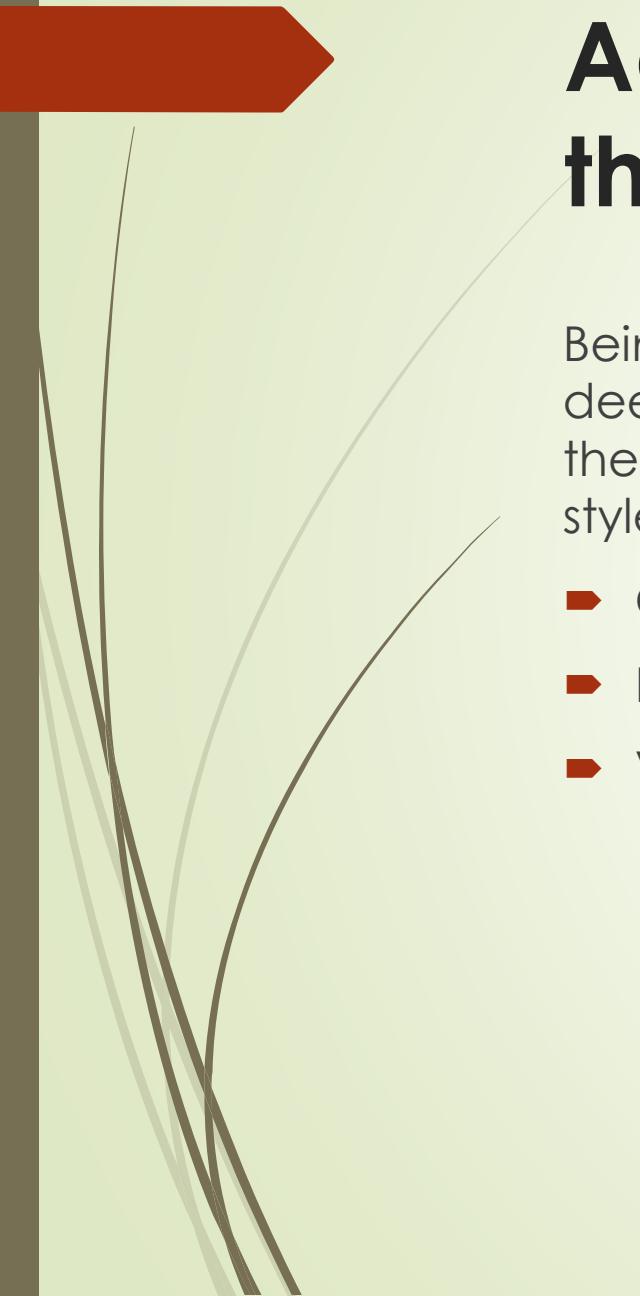
Adapting conventional leadership to the African context

Being an effective leader isn't just about your own actions. It also requires a deep understanding of others. That's why it's important for leaders to embody these additional (and possibly surprising) qualities, no matter the leadership style chosen.

- Compassion

- Emotional intelligence

- Vulnerability

Adapting conventional leadership to the African context

Compassion

- Compassionate leadership **involves a focus on relationships through careful listening to, understanding, empathizing with and supporting other people**, enabling those we lead to feel valued, respected and cared for, so they can reach their potential and do their best work
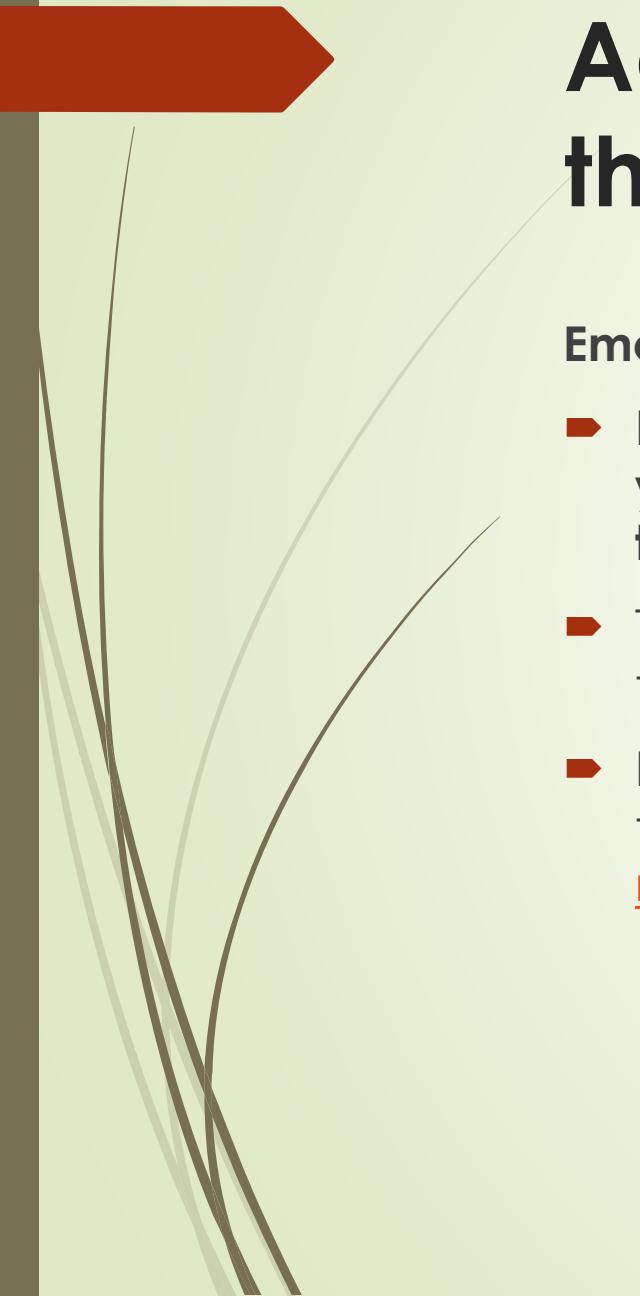
Adapting conventional leadership to the African context

Emotional intelligence

- Emotional intelligence is defined as **the ability to understand and manage your own emotions, as well as recognize and influence the emotions of those around you**.

- The emotional intelligence approach is a radical departure from the traditional leadership style of "I say 'jump,' you say 'how high?'"

- Leadership still requires an authority over the team's vision. At the same time, it must be intertwined with putting team members and their needs first.

Adapting conventional leadership to the African context

Vulnerability

- To be vulnerable is to be **honest** and **to discard one's arrogance**.

- A leader who expresses vulnerability is someone who does not feel compelled to be the first to answer or come up with an idea.

- Being vulnerable as a leader involves a change in mindset that enables the leader to see through the eyes of team members. By doing so, the leader invites the team members to become the drivers of the conversation. The result is that people become more involved and invested.

Conclusions

- Health research efforts and capacity on the continent will not further improve, or become sustainable, without Africans leaders..

- When research is led by African scientists, not only may more locally relevant topics be targeted, but it may be more likely that study findings will be communicated by African researchers in a cultural and policy context that is more accessible and relevant to local populations.

- Looking at leadership through an "African" lens reveals an emerging view of leadership grounded on the continent's realities and experiences.

- Contextualized African leadership is essential to effectuate change for better health in African communities,