

ISTANBUL CONFERENCE ON ECONOMICS AND SOCIETY (ISTCES) 2025

*Pathways to Inclusive Growth: Overcoming Challenges in
Emerging and Developing African Countries.*

24-26 SEPTEMBER 2025

Book of Proceedings

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Sustainable Leadership Competency Model (SLCM) For Emerging Markets and Developing Economies: Integrating Global Frameworks with Regional Realities

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Abstract

Effective leadership is critical for navigating the complex sustainability challenges unique to Emerging Markets and Developing Economies (EMDEs). While global leadership models provide a foundation, they lack contextual applicability for the distinct volatilities and socio-cultural realities of EMDEs, creating a significant gap in both theory and practice. This study aimed to develop and validate a culturally attuned Sustainable Leadership Competency Model (SLCM) specifically for these contexts. The research employed a sequential mixed-methods methodology, beginning with a systematic review of global literature to extract competencies, followed by structured interviews with 13 regional experts for validation and refinement. The resulting validated model identifies five core domains: Strategic Competencies, Core Competencies, Core Values, Collaborative Competencies, and Personal Leadership Capacities comprising 16 specific competencies, including critical refinements such as Frugal Innovation, Critical Reflexivity, and Authentic Humility. This study provides policymakers, educators, and organizational leaders in EMDEs with a practical, evidence-informed framework to cultivate leaders capable of driving inclusive and resilient growth. Future research should focus on developing a quantitative instrument to test the model's predictive validity across diverse EMDE settings.

Keywords: Sustainable leadership, competency model, emerging markets, EMDEs, SDGs

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Introduction

Leadership is widely recognized as a critical determinant of organizational performance, societal transformation, and sustainable development, particularly in the context of Emerging Markets and Developing Economies (EMDEs) where institutional, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities converge (Kouzes & Posner, 1998; Brown & Harvey, 2011). As global challenges intensify, ranging from climate change, resource scarcity, and biodiversity loss to socio-economic inequalities and institutional fragility, the need for leaders capable of navigating complexity, uncertainty, and paradoxical tensions has become increasingly urgent (Garbie, 2014; Kantabutra, 2022; Ferdig, 2007). In this respect, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a universal blueprint for action, emphasizing inclusive, equitable, and environmentally sustainable growth (United Nations, 2015). However, the effective realization of these goals is contingent upon leaders who are not only technically competent but also possess the capacity to integrate systemic thinking, ethical stewardship, and culturally attuned strategies into their decision-making (Senge et al., 2015; Van Norren & Beehner, 2021).

The imperative of sustainable leadership is particularly pronounced in EMDEs, where socio-cultural diversity, institutional constraints, and economic volatility present unique challenges that are often under-addressed by mainstream, Western-centric leadership models (Voak et al., 2024; Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024). Traditional leadership frameworks, designed for relatively stable, resource-rich contexts, frequently fail to equip leaders in EMDEs with the skills, knowledge, and values necessary to drive sustainable outcomes (Gitsham et al., 2008; Strandberg, 2015). For instance, in the manufacturing sector of developing countries such as Zimbabwe, conventional Leadership Competence Frameworks (LCFs) were found to be overly broad and insufficiently focused on sustainability imperatives, resulting in significant gaps between leader preparedness and the competencies required to advance the SDGs (Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024). Similarly, in the ASEAN Halal supply chain sector, leaders often rely on Western definitions of effective leadership that neglect the ethical, cultural, and religious nuances of the local context, leading to inefficiencies, reduced trust, and talent retention challenges (Voak et al., 2024; Abdullah & Azam, 2020). In the Indian private healthcare sector, the absence of context-specific leadership models has similarly revealed substantial competency gaps, particularly in areas such as talent development, accountability, and human resources management, which are critical for ensuring patient safety and organizational resilience (Pandit, 2016; McAlearney, 2008,

2010). Collectively, these studies illustrate that the survival, effectiveness, and sustainability of organizations in EMDEs are contingent on contextually relevant leadership development, rather than a simple transplantation of Western models.

The limitations of existing leadership models are further compounded by a global overemphasis on technical or operational competencies, often at the expense of relational, ethical, and meta-competencies required to navigate multi-stakeholder and cross-cultural environments (Voak et al., 2024; Branine & Pollard, 2010). In the context of sustainability, leaders are increasingly expected to exhibit systemic thinking, anticipatory capacities, reflexivity, and ethical stewardship, as outlined in UNESCO's eight key competencies for sustainable leadership (Van Norren & Beehner, 2021; Nakashima, 2010). However, the current literature reveals a significant disconnect between these global competency frameworks and the leadership practices prevalent in EMDEs, where hierarchical, individualistic, and transactional leadership styles often dominate (Van Norren, 2020; Beehner, 2020b). Indigenous and region-specific leadership philosophies –such as Ubuntu in Africa, Buen Vivir in South America, and Bodhisattva leadership in Asia– offer complementary principles emphasizing collective agency, reciprocity, long-term stewardship, and ethical relationality, yet they remain underrepresented in formal sustainability leadership models (Van Norren, 2020; Van Norren & Beehner, 2021; Bouckaert & Zsolnai, 2012). This gap highlights the necessity for hybrid leadership frameworks that integrate global sustainability competencies with culturally grounded, context-specific leadership practices to create resilient and socially inclusive outcomes.

The inadequacy of existing leadership models in EMDEs manifests as both a practical and strategic problem. Leaders frequently report feeling unprepared to address sustainability challenges, which has serious implications for organizational performance, societal wellbeing, and the attainment of the SDGs (Strandberg, 2015; Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024). In the manufacturing sector, leaders struggle with operationalizing sustainability in complex production systems, while in the Halal supply chain sector, cross-cultural misunderstandings and misaligned ethical frameworks impede effective collaboration and trust (Voak et al., 2024; Hidayat, Rafiki, & Nasution, 2022). In healthcare, ineffective leadership can have life-and-death consequences, underscoring the critical need for leaders who combine technical acumen with ethical, relational, and strategic capacities (Pandit, 2016; Malagón-Londoño, Galán, & Pontón, 1996). These challenges underscore a pressing need for empirically grounded, context-specific leadership competency

models that equip leaders in EMDEs to navigate volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA) while advancing sustainability goals.

From a research perspective, the literature on sustainability leadership in EMDEs is nascent and fragmented, revealing multiple interrelated gaps. First, there is a lack of context-specific, sector-sensitive competency models that align with global sustainability objectives while addressing local cultural and institutional realities (Pandit, 2016; Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024; Voak et al., 2024). Second, indigenous knowledge and non-Western leadership philosophies are underrepresented in formal frameworks, limiting the relevance and effectiveness of leadership interventions in EMDE contexts (Van Norren & Beehner, 2021; Nakashima, 2010). Third, existing frameworks often overemphasize technical competencies and underemphasize meta-competencies such as resilience, reflexivity, ethical stewardship, and collaborative capacity, which are critical for managing multi-level sustainability challenges (Beehner, 2020b; Ferdig, 2007). Finally, many proposed models lack rigorous empirical validation, making their practical applicability uncertain and hindering their adoption in organizations operating in high-stakes, resource-constrained, and culturally diverse contexts (Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024; Van Norren, 2020).

Addressing these gaps, the present study proposes a Sustainable Leadership Competency Model (SLCM) for EMDEs, designed to integrate global sustainability competencies with region-specific cultural, ethical, and operational realities. Building on UNESCO's eight key competencies, contemporary integrative models of sustainability leadership, and sector-specific frameworks such as the Bicycle Metaphor for developing countries (Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024), the model adopts a three-phase methodology: (i) a comprehensive literature review synthesizing metatheories, sustainability leadership frameworks, and global and regional leadership concepts; (ii) adaptation of global models through the incorporation of culturally rooted leadership philosophies alongside systems thinking, anticipatory, normative, and reflexive capacities; and (iii) structured expert validation to ensure cultural, operational, and contextual relevance.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the literature review and theoretical background, synthesizing global and indigenous leadership models and highlighting their relevance to EMDEs. Section 3 outlines the research methodology, detailing the three-phase process of developing and validating the SLCM. Section 4 presents the findings and discussion, including the final SLCM and its applications across sectors and levels of leadership. Section

5 concludes the article, summarizing the study's contributions, implications for practice and policy, limitations, and directions for future research. Through this structured approach, the study bridges the gap between global sustainability aspirations and the localized leadership realities of EMDEs, contributing to both theory and practice in sustainable leadership development.

Literature Review

Theoretical Background: Resource-Based View (RBV)

The Resource-Based View (RBV) is one of the most influential frameworks in strategic management, emphasizing that organizations achieve sustained competitive advantage by leveraging resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) (Barney, 1991, as cited in Liao, 2022). When applied to leadership, RBV provides a powerful lens for understanding how sustainable leadership competencies function as intangible resources that shape long-term organizational resilience and performance.

Sustainable leadership is inherently about balancing economic, social, and environmental goals while navigating complexity and paradox (Ferdig, 2007; Sajjad et al., 2024). From an RBV perspective, the competencies required for this –such as systems thinking, ethical values, stakeholder engagement, and adaptive capacity– represent strategic assets. These capabilities are valuable in addressing grand challenges, rare in their integration of holistic and ethical perspectives, difficult to imitate because they are rooted in individual and cultural values, and non-substitutable given their unique role in fostering sustainable outcomes (Peterlin et al., 2015).

Avery and Bergsteiner (2011a, 2011b) strengthen this argument by conceptualizing sustainable leadership as a structured set of practices designed to balance people, profit, and planet over the life of the firm. When embedded as leadership competencies, these practices align with RBV's criteria for sustained advantage. Similarly, Rainey (2013) emphasizes that sustainable leadership entails diverse philosophies and methods that cannot easily be replicated by competitors, further reinforcing their role as VRIN resources.

RBV also highlights the dynamic and adaptive nature of strategic resources. Sustainable leadership, as described by Sajjad et al. (2024), is not static but a continuous process of innovation and reflexivity. Leaders manage tensions between competing sustainability goals by leveraging unique cognitive and socio-cognitive processes. This adaptability reflects RBV's premise that resources must evolve to remain sources of competitive advantage in changing environments.

Importantly, RBV reframes leadership not as a generic capability but as a context-specific set of competencies that align with organizational strategy and values. Liao (2022) argues that sustainable leadership operates across individual, organizational, and systemic levels, enabling leaders to integrate ethical, economic, and environmental concerns. These competencies extend beyond technical expertise and embody intangible qualities that position leadership as a cornerstone of sustained organizational success.

In sum, RBV provides a robust theoretical foundation for examining sustainable leadership competencies as critical intangible resources. By meeting the VRIN criteria, these competencies serve as the backbone of long-term organizational and societal value creation, underscoring that sustainable leadership is not just a style but a strategic asset central to enduring advantage (Sajjad et al., 2024; Ferdig, 2007; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a).

What is the Leadership?

Leadership has been a central focus of organizational research for decades, yet no single, universally accepted definition exists. Instead, the concept of leadership is best understood as a dynamic and multifaceted social process. Liden, Wang, and Wang (2025) synthesize decades of leadership literature and emphasize that leadership is fundamentally a social influence process in which leaders attempt to motivate and enable followers to contribute toward achieving collective goals (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2002). This perspective highlights the relational and goal-directed nature of leadership, distinguishing it from mere managerial authority. While management focuses on planning, organizing, leading, and controlling resources, leadership is characterized by vision, dynamism, and the ability to inspire others toward a shared purpose (Kotter, 1990; Liden et al., 2025).

Leadership is not merely tied to formal roles or titles; rather, it is action oriented. Individuals can enact leadership through behaviors that inspire, encourage, or engage others, irrespective of their formal position (Forbes, 2017; Liden et al., 2025). This perspective aligns with relational theories of leadership, such as the Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory, which posits that leadership effectiveness arises from unique, dyadic relationships between leaders and followers, rather than an average leadership style applied uniformly (Graen, Dansereau, & Minami, 1972). Furthermore, the legitimacy and success of leadership depend on followership, underscoring the reciprocal nature of the leader-follower relationship (Baker, 2007; Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019).

Carton (2022) complements this relational view by distinguishing between the study of leaders (the person) and leading (the process). According to Carton, the essence of leadership lies in the process of influence, wherein an individual attempts to motivate others toward a common purpose. Leading involves three core mechanisms: directing effort toward a shared objective, initiating effort through goal setting, and maintaining effort via feedback and subgoals (Latham & Pinder, 2005). Importantly, this process is independent of formal authority, meaning that anyone can exercise leadership by effectively influencing others toward collective goals (Carton, 2022).

By integrating these perspectives, a comprehensive academic definition of leadership emerges:

Leadership is a dynamic, social influence process, grounded in relationships, whereby an individual (formal or informal) motivates and enables followers to contribute to the achievement of collective goals. Leadership is action-oriented, distinct from managerial authority, and contingent on the recognition and acceptance of followers.

This definition captures several critical dimensions of leadership:

- **Process and Influence:** Leadership is an active process of influencing others, rather than a static attribute or title.
- **Relational Nature:** Leadership is fundamentally rooted in the interactions and relationships between leaders and followers.
- **Goal-Oriented:** Leadership is directed toward achieving shared objectives that are meaningful to both leaders and followers.
- **Follower-Dependent:** The effectiveness of leadership is contingent upon followership; without followers, leadership cannot exist.
- **Non-Position-Dependent:** Leadership can be exercised by anyone, regardless of formal authority or hierarchical status.

This foundational understanding sets the stage for exploring sustainable leadership competencies, particularly within the complex contexts of Emerging Markets and Developing Economies (EMDEs). It underscores that effective leadership is not only about positional power but also about relational influence, ethical engagement, and goal alignment-principles that are essential for addressing the sustainability challenges that characterize EMDE contexts (Van Norren & Beehner, 2021; Ruwanika & Massyn, 2024; Voak, Fairman, & Helmy, 2024).

Sustainable Leadership

The concept of sustainable leadership has emerged over the past three decades as scholars and practitioners have sought to redefine leadership in response to complex global challenges such as climate change, resource scarcity, social inequality, and disruptive technological transformations. Unlike traditional leadership models that often prioritize short-term gains and efficiency, sustainable leadership emphasizes long-term viability, systemic integration, ethical responsibility, and the simultaneous pursuit of economic, social, and environmental goals. Its development can be traced through several key stages, beginning with foundational work in education and sustainable development and later expanding into organizational, business, and societal contexts.

Early Foundations of Sustainable Leadership

The intellectual roots of sustainable leadership can be linked to the concept of sustainable development, articulated in the Brundtland Commission Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987), which defined sustainability as meeting “the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This report provided a foundation for later applications of sustainability in organizational and leadership contexts, emphasizing the balance between present and future priorities.

Building on this foundation, Hargreaves and Fink (2003, 2004) were among the first to articulate the idea of sustainable leadership in the educational domain. They described it as a holistic and ethical approach that ensures leadership practices are meaningful, enduring, and beneficial for the broader community. Their definition stressed that “sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts. It is a shared responsibility, that does not unduly deplete human or financial resources, and that cares for and avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, p. 3). They further elaborated seven principles of sustainable leadership, including depth (fostering meaningful learning), sustainability (ensuring long-term success through succession planning), breadth (shared leadership and dialogue), justice (equitable distribution of resources), diversity (promotion of variety and adaptability), resourcefulness (attracting and developing talent), and conservation (drawing lessons from past experiences to create a better future) (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004).

This early framing positioned sustainable leadership as a corrective to leadership practices that were short-lived, resource-extractive, or narrowly focused on performance metrics. By embedding principles of justice, continuity,

and inclusivity, Hargreaves and Fink set the stage for subsequent applications in business and management.

Expansion into Business and Organizational Contexts

The notion of sustainable leadership entered the field of management through the work of Avery (2005), who emphasized the need for leadership that supported long-term decision-making, systematic innovation, and high-quality outcomes. Avery argued that leaders must balance the “triple bottom line” of people, profit, and planet through practices rooted in ethical behavior, corporate social responsibility, and environmental stewardship. This perspective represented an important shift, as it placed sustainability at the heart of strategic leadership and business success rather than treating it as an external constraint.

Further development came from Avery and Bergsteiner (2011a, 2011b), who articulated the honeybee–locust model of sustainable leadership. In this model, honeybee organizations represent long-term, stakeholder-oriented, and sustainability-driven leadership practices, while locust organizations exemplify short-term, exploitative approaches that exhaust resources and harm ecosystems. Their model identified 23 practices of sustainable leadership, structured in a pyramid model, with basic practices such as stakeholder responsibility and long-term perspective forming the foundation, and high-level practices such as self-management, knowledge sharing, and performance drivers like innovation and quality at the top (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a). The ultimate goal of these practices was to create resilient organizations capable of sustaining customer satisfaction, reputation, and long-term value creation (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011b).

In parallel, Ferdig (2007) provided a seminal definition that significantly influenced later scholarship. He described sustainable leadership as “a holistic approach to co-creating a sustainable future that balances among and between simultaneous and sometimes contradictory demands for economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable solutions” (as cited in Sajjad et al., 2024, p. 25). Ferdig’s contribution was notable for expanding the boundaries of leadership beyond formal authority, arguing that “anyone who takes responsibility for understanding and acting on sustainability challenges qualifies as a sustainability leader” (Ferdig, 2007, p. 25). This definition emphasized inclusivity, collaboration, systems thinking, and ethical responsibility, positioning leadership as a collective and adaptive process rather than an individual role. Ferdig also highlighted the role of complexity science, suggesting that sustainable leadership thrives in contexts of uncertainty, paradox, and dynamic adaptation.

Rainey (2013) further enriched the concept by framing sustainable leadership as a “rich mosaic of principles, philosophies, perspectives, styles, mindsets, experiences, methods, and constructs” (as cited in Sajjad et al., 2024, p. xix). This metaphor reflected the multi-dimensionality and integrative nature of the construct, suggesting that no single leadership model or practice could fully capture its scope. Similarly, Peterlin, Pearse, and Dimovski (2015) emphasized the importance of considering “a wide range of complex interrelations among individuals, the business community, global markets, and the ecosystem” (as cited in Sajjad et al., 2024, p. 280). Their perspective underscored the interconnectedness of sustainability challenges and the need for leaders to balance welfare, social values, long-term organizational success, and environmental stewardship.

Contemporary Integrations and Multilevel Perspectives

More recent scholarship has sought to integrate these diverse perspectives into coherent frameworks. Tideman, Arts, and Zandee (2013) described sustainable leadership as behavior that emerges from leaders’ awareness of disruptive changes in business and society, emphasizing the interaction between leadership consciousness and contextual dynamics in driving transformation. Their approach recognized the role of leadership awareness in responding to rapidly evolving environmental and societal challenges.

Similarly, Gerard, McMillan, and D’Annunzio-Green (2017) conceptualized sustainable leadership as a multidimensional construct that integrates individual, organizational, and systemic factors. Their work suggested that sustainable leadership cannot be understood at a single level but must be analyzed across contexts and stakeholder domains.

A major step toward synthesis came from the integrative reviews by Liao (2022) and Sajjad, Eweje, and Raziq (2024). Liao (2022) defined sustainable leadership as “a leadership approach that balances economic, social, and environmental goals through long-term vision, ethical practices, stakeholder engagement, and systemic innovation” (p. 1045570). Liao highlighted the construct’s cross-level functioning –operating at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels–while stressing characteristics such as ethical grounding, inclusivity, innovation, and adaptability.

Building further, Sajjad et al. (2024) offered a comprehensive synthesis, describing sustainable leadership as “a dynamic and complex process in which sustainability-oriented leaders engage in intricate psycho-cognitive and socio-cognitive

processes to foster sustainable outcomes for business and society in both the short and long run” (p. 2850). They emphasized its paradoxical nature, as leaders must manage tensions between economic, social, and environmental objectives without defaulting to trade-offs. Instead, sustainable leadership seeks holistic integration, reflexivity, resilience, and long-term orientation. This definition underscored that sustainable leadership is not a static attribute but an ongoing process of balancing tensions, innovating strategies, and addressing societal grand challenges.

Synthesized Definition for the Present Study

Drawing on this body of work, sustainable leadership can be understood as an evolving leadership paradigm that integrates ethics, systems thinking, long-term orientation, and inclusivity. From its early conceptualizations in education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, 2004) to its expansion into management and organizational research (Avery, 2005; Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011a, 2011b; Ferdig, 2007), and to its most recent synthesized frameworks (Liao, 2022; Sajjad et al., 2024), the construct has consistently highlighted the imperative for leaders to balance the triple bottom line while cultivating resilience and adaptability in complex environments.

For the purposes of this study, sustainable leadership has been defined as:

A dynamic, systemic, and ethically grounded approach to leadership in which leaders, formal and informal, co-create long-term economic, social, and environmental value by managing paradoxes, engaging stakeholders inclusively, and fostering resilience across micro, meso, and macro contexts. Sustainable leadership is not only about maintaining performance but also about regenerating resources, empowering communities, and enabling organizations in emerging and developing economies to thrive under conditions of uncertainty and disruption.

This definition builds on prior scholarship while extending the conversation to the specific challenges of emerging and developing economies (EMDEs), where contextual constraints, institutional voids, and pressing societal needs demand leadership that is both adaptive and transformative.

Research Methodology

This study employed a three-phase methodology to develop and validate a competency model for sustainable leadership within emerging markets and developing economies (EMDEs). The methodology combined a systematic literature review, categorization of competencies based on global competency models, and expert validation.

Phase 1: Systematic Literature Review

The first phase involved a systematic literature review (SLR) to identify competencies associated with sustainable leadership, particularly in contexts relevant to EMDEs. The review followed the PRISMA framework, which comprises four stages: Identification, Screening, Eligibility, and Inclusion.

- **Identification:** The initial database search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2025. Search terms included combinations of “sustainable leadership competencies,” “sustainable development,” “developing economies,” and “emerging markets.” This process yielded 153 articles.

- **Screening:** After removing duplicates, non-English texts, and irrelevant publications, 68 articles remained.

- **Eligibility:** These articles were assessed in depth for relevance to leadership competencies in sustainability contexts, resulting in 37 articles.

- **Inclusion:** Finally, 22 high-quality, directly relevant articles were selected for full review.

The outcomes of this process are illustrated in Figure 1 (PRISMA Flow Diagram).

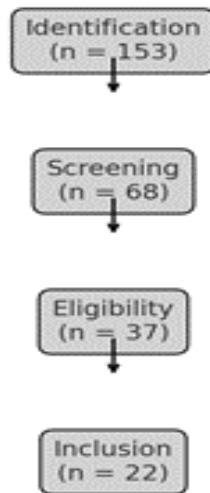


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram.

Phase 2: Categorization Based on Global Competency Models

In the second phase, the competencies extracted from the 22 selected articles were categorized using existing global competency models for sustainable leadership. This step ensured that the identified competencies aligned with established theoretical frameworks while allowing for contextual relevance to EMDEs.

Phase 3: Expert Validation

The third phase consisted of structured interviews with 13 regional leadership and sustainability experts, including 2 CEOs from the FMCG and energy sectors and 11 scholars specializing in management and sustainable development. Experts were identified through a snowball sampling method, and interviews continued until theoretical saturation was reached. During this phase, the categorized competencies were validated, refined, and adjusted to ensure cultural, contextual, and operational applicability.

Finding

Competency Identification and Categorization

The development of the initial competency framework was conducted through a systematic review of 19 seminal articles on sustainable leadership. Our process involved a meticulous, multi-stage analysis. First, we conducted a full-text thematic analysis of each article, carefully extracting every mentioned leadership trait, skill, behavior, and value. This yielded a long list of over 30 distinct competencies. To synthesize these findings, we employed additive-inductive coding approach. We used the five overarching categories from the foundational SLCM model (Strategic, Core, Values, Collaborative, Personal) as our initial deductive framework. We then inductively sorted the extracted competencies into these categories based on their thematic similarity and functional purpose. For example, traits like “holistic thinking” and “anticipatory thinking” were grouped under Strategic Competencies as they relate to navigating complexity, while values like “ethical conduct” and “stewardship” were clustered into Core Values as they form the leader’s moral foundation (Table 1).

Competency Category & Specific Competency	Frequency	Mentioned By (Author, Year)
i. Strategic Competencies		
Systems Thinking	10	Muff et al. (2020), Van Norren & Beehner (2021), Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022), Visser & Courtice, Asik & Esen, Juhro et al. (2020), O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024)
Stakeholder Engagement	7	Muff et al. (2020), Ahmad et al. (2023), Visser & Courtice, Asik & Esen, Yanduri & Siddayya (2024), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024)
Adaptability	5	Visser & Courtice, O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024)
Reflexivity	4	Muff et al. (2020) (as critical thinking), Van Norren & Beehner (2021), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024)
Sustainability Literacy / SDG Literacy	3	Van Norren & Beehner (2021), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Ahmad et al. (2023) (implied)
ii. Core Competencies		
Social Innovation	5	Muff et al. (2020) (Change & Innovation), Visser & Courtice (Creative style), Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022), Juhro et al. (2020) (Breakthrough), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024)
Inclusive Decision-Making	4	Muff et al. (2020) (Stakeholder Relations), Visser & Courtice (Inclusive style), Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024)
Ecosystem Thinking	2	Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Van Norren & Beehner (2021) (implied via biocentrism)
iii. Core Values		

Ethical Conduct	12	Muff et al. (2020), McCann & Holt (2010), Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022), Visser & Courtice, Pandit (2016), O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024), Iqbal et al. (2020) (implied), Liao (2022) (implied)
Stewardship	5	Muff et al. (2020) (Ethics & Values), Visser & Courtice (Altruistic style), O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Sajjad et al. (2024)
Equity & Respect for All	4	Van Norren & Beehner (2021) (Normative), Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024) (implied)
iv. Collaborative Competencies		
Cross-Sector Partnering / Consensus Building	9	Muff et al. (2020) (Collaboration), Van Norren & Beehner (2021), Visser & Courtice, Asik & Esen, Juhro et al. (2020) (Catalytic Collab.), Yanduri & Sidayya (2024), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024)
v. Personal Leadership Capacities		
Self-Awareness	10	Muff et al. (2020), Van Norren & Beehner (2021), Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022), Visser & Courtice, O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024), Liao (2022) (antecedent)
Resilience	6	Visser & Courtice, O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014), Ruwanika & Massyn (2024), Sajjad et al. (2024), Nisha et al. (2022) (implied)
Authenticity	3	Visser & Courtice (Authenticity implied in "Being"), O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010) (Intrapersonal), BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014) (Leading Self)

Table 1. Competency Identification and Categorization.

The definitions for each category and competency were not invented but were synthesized directly from the language and descriptions used across the literature. For instance, the definition of "Systems Thinking" was distilled from its repeated characterization as "the ability to understand complex interconnections," a phrase found in the works of Visser & Courtice, Sajjad et al., and Asik & Esen. This

rigorous process ensured our initial model was a comprehensive and faithful representation of the existing global scholarship, providing a robust foundation for subsequent contextual validation through expert interviews (Table 2).

Competency Category	Definition & Purpose	Specific Competencies	Definition of Specific Competency	Key References
Strategic Competencies	Abilities to analyze, plan, and guide an organization through complex sustainability challenges with a long-term, adaptive perspective.	Systems Thinking	The ability to understand and analyze complex, interrelated social, ecological, and economic systems, recognizing interdependencies and feedback loops.	Wiek et al. (2011) via Asik & Esen; Visser & Courtice; Sajjad et al. (2024); Van Norren & Beehner (2021)
		Stakeholder Engagement	The ability to identify, communicate with, and incorporate the perspectives of diverse internal and external groups affected by or affecting the organization's actions.	Muff et al. (2020); Ahmad et al. (2023); BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014)
		Adaptability	The capacity to adjust strategies and operations in response to changing sustainability challenges, market conditions, and new information.	Visser & Courtice; O'Dwyer & Ryan (2010); Sajjad et al. (2024)
		Reflexivity	The practice of critical self-analysis regarding one's own values, assumptions, and impact, and the ability to question dominant norms.	Van Norren & Beehner (2021); Sajjad et al. (2024); Ruwanika & Massyn (2024)
		Anticipatory Competency (Foresight)	The ability to anticipate and envision future trends, uncertainties, and sustainability scenarios to inform proactive decision-making.	Wiek et al. (2011) via Asik & Esen; Van Norren & Beehner (2021); Suriyankietkaew et al. (2022)

Core Competencies	Abilities to integrate sustainability principles directly into the core value creation and innovation processes of the organization.	Social Innovation	The capacity to develop and implement novel solutions to social, economic, and environmental challenges that are both sustainable and scalable.	Muff et al. (2020) - “Change & Innovation”; Juhro et al. (2020) - “Breakthrough”; Visser & Courtice - “Creative” style
		Inclusive Decision-Making	The practice of ensuring diverse voices and perspectives are heard and considered in the process of reaching decisions that affect the community and stakeholders.	Muff et al. (2020) - “Stakeholder Relation”; Visser & Courtice - “Inclusive” style; Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015)
		Ecosystem Thinking	Understanding the organization as part of a broader ecological and social system, emphasizing health, resilience, and interdependence over extraction.	Ruwanika & Massyn (2024); Van Norren & Beehner (2021) - via “Biocentrism”
Core Values	The fundamental principles and ethical foundations that guide a leader’s motivation, judgment, and behavior towards sustainable outcomes.	Ethical Conduct	A steadfast commitment to acting with integrity, honesty, and moral principle in all decisions, prioritizing doing what is right over what is easy.	McCann & Holt (2010); Muff et al. (2020) - “Ethics & Values”; Sajjad et al. (2024)
		Stewardship	The attitude and practice of responsibly managing the resources, well-being, and long-term health of the organization, society, and the environment for future generations.	Visser & Courtice - “Altruistic” style; O’Dwyer & Ryan (2010); Sajjad et al. (2024)
		Equity & Respect for All	A deep-seated belief in and commitment to fairness, justice, dignity, and the inherent value of all people and living things.	Van Norren & Beehner (2021) - “Normative Competency”; Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015); Ruwanika & Massyn (2024)

Collaborative Competencies	Abilities to build trust, facilitate dialogue, and work effectively across traditional boundaries to achieve common sustainability goals.	Cross-Sector Partnering	The skill to build and maintain strategic alliances and partnerships with organizations from different sectors (business, government, civil society) to address systemic challenges.	Juhro et al. (2020) -“Catalytic Collaboration”; Visser & Courtice; Yanduri & Siddayya (2024) – “Collaborative”
		Consensus Building	The ability to facilitate dialogue among diverse and conflicting parties to find common ground and develop mutually acceptable solutions.	Muff et al. (2020); BSR (Gitman & Goldenberg, 2014); Van Norren & Beehner (2021)
Personal Leadership Capacities	The internal attributes, emotional skills, and self-knowledge that enable a leader to act effectively and authentically in demanding sustainability roles.	Self-Awareness	A deep understanding of one’s own values, strengths, weaknesses, biases, and emotional drivers, and how they impact others.	Muff et al. (2020); Visser & Courtice; Sajjad et al. (2024)
		Resilience	The capacity to persevere, adapt, and recover from setbacks, crises, and the inherent tensions of pursuing sustainability.	Visser & Courtice; O’Dwyer & Ryan (2010); Sajjad et al. (2024)
		Authenticity	The practice of aligning one’s actions with deeply held values and beliefs, leading with transparency, consistency, and genuineness.	Visser & Courtice (implied in “Being”); O’Dwyer & Ryan (2010) - “Intrapersonal Competency”

Table 2. Competency Definition.

Expert Validation

The validation phase consisted of structured interviews with 13 regional experts, who unanimously affirmed the model's core categories while providing critical, context-driven refinements to enhance its practicality for emerging markets. For instance, when asked about the relevance of 'Social Innovation,' a CEO from the energy sector noted, "The term is right, but the reality here is we aren't just innovating; we are improvising with extreme constraints. We called it 'Jugaad' innovation for years-it's about creating robust solutions with minimal capital." This insight led to refining the competency into the more precise 'Frugal Innovation.' Similarly, scholars emphasized the need for a more power-aware definition of reflection. One professor stated, "It's not enough to be reflexive about one's actions; a leader here must be critically aware of their power and privilege. The question isn't just 'what did I do?' but 'whose voice am I not hearing, and what unintended harm could my decision cause?'" This pushed the evolution of 'Reflexivity' into 'Critical Reflexivity.' Furthermore, the value of 'Authenticity' was challenged by an FMCG CEO who argued, "An 'authentic' arrogant leader is still arrogant. What we need is confident humility - the authenticity to admit what you don't know and to learn from the woman running the small kiosk." This rich feedback was instrumental in refining the value to 'Authentic Humility,' ensuring the final model is not just theoretically sound but also deeply culturally attuned and actionable for leaders on the ground (Table 3).

Category	Definition & Practical Focus	Specific Competencies	Refined, Practical Definition
Strategic Competencies	The knack for navigating complex, often unstable environments by seeing the whole picture, planning for the long term, and adapting quickly to new realities.	Systems Thinking	The ability to connect the dots between social, environmental, and economic pressures. Understands how a community protest, a new regulation, or a water shortage can impact the entire business.
	Stakeholder Engagement		Going beyond PR to genuinely build trust and co-create solutions with often marginalized groups (local communities, informal networks) and powerful actors (government, NGOs) simultaneously.

		Adaptability	The skill to pivot strategies with agility in the face of political shifts, economic volatility, and resource scarcity without losing sight of the long-term vision.
		Critical Reflexivity	The habit of constantly questioning one’s own assumptions and power. Asking: “Who is not in this room? How do our ‘est practices’ negatively impact the local ecosystem?”
		Anticipatory Thinking (Foresight)	Reading weak signals to anticipate future crises and opportunities, from climate migration patterns to shifts in global supply chains and preparing the organization accordingly.
Core Competencies	Abilities to drive innovation and make decisions that create tangible value for both the business and society, often with limited resources.	Frugal Innovation	Creating more social, environmental, and economic value with fewer resources. Designing affordable, sustainable solutions that are accessible to low-income populations.
		Inclusive Decision-Making	Ensuring the voices of women, youth, and other underrepresented groups are not just heard but are influential in shaping outcomes that affect them.
		Ecosystem Cultivation	Moving beyond “managing” stakeholders to actively nurturing and investing in the health of the entire business ecosystem –from local suppliers to natural resources– as a strategy for resilience.
Core Values	The non-negotiable ethical foundation that earns a leader legitimacy and trust, which is the ultimate currency in complex markets.	Moral Integrity	Consistently acting with honesty and fairness, especially when no one is watching. Resisting the pressure for short-cut solutions that compromise long-term community well-being.

		Stewardship & Legacy	A deep sense of responsibility for safeguarding resources and well-being for future generations, counteracting short-term profit pressures.
		Radical Respect	A genuine belief in the inherent dignity and value of every individual, from the factory floor to the farmer's field, and actively working to rectify power imbalances.
Collaborative Competencies	The skill of building bridges across deep divides of sector, culture, and power to achieve goals no single organization can alone.	Cross-Sector Convening	The ability to act as a credible "honest broker" to bring competing businesses, government agencies, and community leaders to the same table to address systemic issues.
		Consensus Building	Facilitating dialogue to find a workable path forward amidst highly divergent interests, often relying on patient relationship-building rather than formal authority.
Personal Leadership Capacities	The inner resilience and self-knowledge required to lead sustainably through intense pressure and paradox.	Contextual Self-Awareness	Understanding how one's own background, biases, and position of power are perceived within the local cultural and social context.
		Resilience & Composure	The emotional fortitude to withstand setbacks, manage constant ambiguity, and maintain optimism while dealing with daunting developmental challenges.
		Authentic Humility	The confidence to admit what you don't know, to defer to local expertise, and to lead with a sense of service rather than ego.

Table 3. Finalized Sustainable Leadership Competency Model for Emerging and Developing Economies.

Discussion and Implications

The Sustainable Leadership Competency Model (SLCM) developed in this study advances both theory and practice by contextualizing global leadership frameworks for the realities of Emerging Markets and Developing Economies (EMDEs). While prior scholarship has emphasized universal competencies such as systems thinking, stakeholder engagement, and ethical conduct (Avery & Bergsteiner, 2011; Ferdig, 2007; Liao, 2022), this study demonstrates that their practical expression requires adaptation to the socio-economic volatility, institutional fragility, and cultural pluralism of EMDE contexts.

Theoretical Contributions

First, the refinement of Frugal Innovation expands the literature on innovation-oriented leadership by embedding resource-constraint awareness into competency models. Whereas prior models emphasize broad “social innovation,” our findings show that leaders in EMDEs must demonstrate *Jugaad*-like ingenuity-designing affordable, scalable solutions under scarcity. This aligns with the sustainability-innovation nexus (Nidumolu, Prahalad, & Rangaswami, 2009) while extending it by foregrounding the role of contextual necessity in shaping innovative leadership practices.

Second, the introduction of Critical Reflexivity contributes to critical leadership studies by positioning reflexivity not merely as self-awareness but as a power-conscious practice (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). In volatile institutional environments, leaders must interrogate whose interests are privileged and whose voices are marginalized in decision-making. This reframing connects sustainable leadership to broader debates on equity, representation, and ethical stewardship.

Third, Authentic Humility advances leadership theory by enriching the literature on humility in leadership (Owens & Hekman, 2012). Traditional definitions of authenticity risk legitimizing destructive traits if leaders act “true to self” without ethical grounding. Our refinement emphasizes humility as the safeguard - requiring leaders to admit limitations, defer to local expertise, and lead with service rather than ego. This aligns with paradox theory (Smith & Lewis, 2011), highlighting how leaders in EMDEs balance confidence with vulnerability to build legitimacy and trust in contexts of systemic inequality.

Collectively, these refinements demonstrate that sustainability competencies are not static or universal but contextually mediated expressions of global principles, shaped by institutional voids, cultural traditions, and developmental constraints.

Practical and Policy Implications

The findings also provide actionable insights for practitioners and policy-makers. At the organizational level, companies operating in EMDEs can embed the SLCM into leadership development programs, succession planning, and performance management systems. For example, assessment centers and 360-degree feedback instruments can explicitly measure competencies such as Critical Reflexivity and Authentic Humility alongside traditional managerial skills.

At the educational level, business schools and training institutions should integrate frugal innovation case studies, indigenous leadership philosophies (Ubuntu, Buen Vivir, Bodhisattva), and experiential learning modules that simulate resource-constrained decision-making. This would foster leaders who can operate effectively within EMDE realities rather than relying on transplanted Western models.

At the policy level, governments and multilateral organizations can create enabling environments by embedding these competencies into leadership accreditation frameworks, funding criteria, and capacity-building initiatives. For instance:

Development banks could require evidence of ecosystem cultivation and stakeholder engagement in loan and investment criteria.

Ministries of education and labor could incentivize universities to align leadership curricula with competencies such as Frugal Innovation and Radical Respect.

Cross-sector platforms could be established to convene leaders from business, civil society, and government, institutionalizing consensus-building as a leadership practice.

In sum, the SLCM offers a concrete roadmap for cultivating sustainable leaders who are not only ethically grounded and strategically adept but also culturally responsive and contextually resilient. By connecting refinements to established leadership theories and outlining specific organizational and policy pathways, this study strengthens the bridge between theory and practice while addressing the urgent leadership needs of EMDEs.

Conclusion

This study successfully developed and validated a comprehensive Sustainable Leadership Competency Model specifically designed for the unique contexts of emerging and developing economies. By integrating a systematic review of global literature with rich, qualitative insights from regional experts, the research moves beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership development. The final model, comprising Strategic Competencies, Core Competencies, Core Values, Collaborative Competencies, and Personal Leadership Capacities, represents a nuanced framework that is both academically grounded and practically actionable. It provides a critical answer to the pressing need for leaders who can navigate inherent volatilities, bridge deep societal divides, and drive growth that is not only economic but also inclusive, resilient, and sustainable (Figure 1).

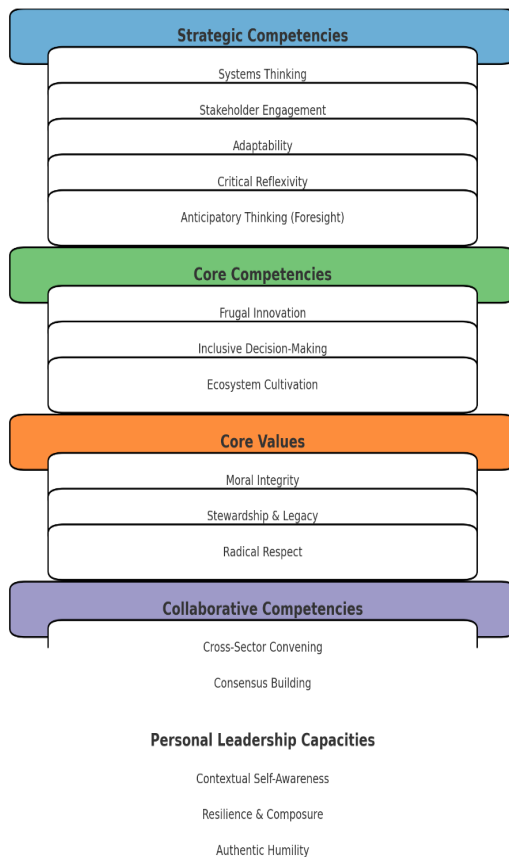


Figure 1. Sustainable Leadership Competency Model.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that pave the way for future research. The primary limitation is the qualitative nature of the validation phase, which, while providing depth, limits the statistical generalizability of the findings across all emerging markets.

1. Future Research Direction 1: The logical next step is to develop a quantitative instrument, such as a survey scale based on this model, and to test its predictive validity through large-scale studies across different countries and sectors to establish its generalizability and measure its impact on organizational sustainability performance.

2. Future Research Direction 2: Researchers should employ a longitudinal design to track leaders who exhibit these competencies over time, providing causal evidence of how they directly influence long-term organizational resilience and community impact.

3. Future Research Direction 3: Further investigation could explore the cultural nuances between different emerging regions (e.g., Southeast Asia vs. Latin America vs. Africa) to identify if and how the relative weight or expression of certain competencies differs, leading to even more finely tuned regional models.

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