COVER NOTE

COVID-19 Special Issue

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Available online: 31 March 2025

Welcome to this Special Issue of the *Journal of Leadership and Developing Societies*. This special issue centers on the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and explores leadership responses to one of the most significant global crises in recent history. The papers featured here were originally conceived and written during the initial months of the pandemic in 2020, when uncertainty loomed large, timelines were unclear, and societal outcomes were unpredictable. As academics and students at the African Leadership Centre (ALC) at King's College London, we were engaging with leadership theory and practice in real time while navigating this unprecedented moment in history. This issue represents a valuable collection of case studies and theoretical contributions that shed light on leadership during a crisis.

The framing paper, *Leadership in Crisis: Markers of Sustained Influence for Societal Mobilisation in Response to COVID-19*, was first drafted in April 2020 during the United Kingdom's initial lockdown. At the time, our postgraduate MSc programs in Leadership and Development were midway through the second semester, and our teaching emphasized leadership as both an analytical tool and a practical framework for addressing real-world problems. In our curriculum, leadership emerges as the capacity to mobilize others to address challenges—whether on a societal, institutional, or individual level. Leadership, as we teach it, is dynamic and context-dependent, with effective leaders responding to the needs of the moment and earning the trust of followers by presenting credible solutions to the problems they face.

ALC students, who came from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, had been engaging with historical and theoretical analyses of leadership in crisis throughout their time with us. Throughout our teaching, we do role play crisis problem-solving exercises with students, where they are given a scenario and have to come up with credible solutions in groups under timed conditions. Suddenly, we found ourselves living through a real-world crisis that demanded immediate adaptation and problem-solving. It presented a live case study of global and local leadership in action, the likes of which we had been discussing and role playing early in the academic year. As part of our adaptation to that new situation, students were given the opportunity to change their previously agreed dissertation research paper topic to, instead, undertake 'real time' research on the pandemic unfurling before us.

This Issue of LDS is a reflection of that time. It provides analysis of the pandemic's initial stages from the

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perspective of leadership studies and offers case studies that remain relevant for future crises. These papers, initially submitted in 2020 and revised for peer review and publication in 2024, focus on the period from December 2019 to August 2020, a time when societies across the globe grappled with the pandemic's first wave. While these case studies are specific to that early phase, the concepts and frameworks they explore—such as leadership infrastructure, societal trust, and emergent leadership—are broadly applicable to subsequent phases of the pandemic. The vaccine rollouts, for example, which are not discussed here, provided a different but still serious logistical and ethical challenge for governments and leaders across the world. Societies and resources were mobilised more effectively or not in different contexts, with emergent leaders from societal seeking to fill gaps and protect vulnerable groups left behind by those national efforts. They are also relevant to subsequent crises such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where nations have again needed to mobilise citizens for a cause presented in different ways in different contexts.

This Special Issue includes one theoretical framing paper and four peer-reviewed research articles. These were originally written during the pandemic in the way outlined above. The commentary, a leadership-as-practice reflection, and a policy brief were written more recently as part of this special issue. Together, they provide a rich and nuanced understanding of leadership in crisis.

The framing paper is titled *Leadership in Crisis: Markers of Sustained Influence for Societal Mobilisation in Response to COVID-19* by Funmi Olonisakin and Barney Walsh. This paper explores why certain societies were more effective in mobilizing their populations during the pandemic's early stages. Its main contribution is introducing the concept of "leadership infrastructure," distinguishing between its "hardware" and "software" components. The *hardware* refers to tangible elements such as government institutions, military capacity, and logistical frameworks—the visible and structural tools available for state action. The s*oftware* encompasses the relational dynamics between leaders and society, and within and across societal groups. These include trust, communication, and cultural norms that govern certain behaviours.

The paper helps explain that while the United States was, prior to the pandemic, viewed as been excellently prepared for fighting pandemics, as these assessments were largely based on understanding of its strong hardware - its resources and infrastructure. Its software, however, namely the societal trust and coherence required for effective mobilization, was deeply fractured and contributed to some disastrous outcomes under the polarizing leadership of Donald Trump. In contrast, China demonstrated a robust combination of hardware and software, leveraging state capacity and societal trust to enforce swift and effective responses, albeit with coercive undertones (the Chinese government was also later eventually responsive to societal discontent during the 'opening up phase' where citizens became tired of and protested against the continued lock downs which prompted a more rapid lifting of restrictions).

The framing paper's emphasis on leadership infrastructure provides a crucial analytical lens for understanding the nuanced responses across the case studies presented in this issue and, we hope and believe, to leadership studies and leadership theory more broadly. Understanding leadership and leadership infrastructure in this way, by differentiating between the 'software' and 'hardware' components of it, is a useful analytical tool which can be applied to leadership at various levels. The discussion of 'alternative infrastructure', helps explain how this software and hardware is not only relevant to national or state level leadership efforts; but can include – and help explain the effectiveness or ineffectiveness – of a broad range of institutions. These include religious institutions, traditional rulers, youth groups, social movements, private sector, transnational groups, and paramilitary groups, all of which were present and influential in different ways during COVID and a great many other crisis situations.

The first main paper in the issue, is *Leading in Crisis: Leaders' Approaches to Societal Mobilisation in Response to COVID-19 in Kano State, Nigeria*, by Ibrahim Mohammed Machina. This paper examines leadership responses in Kano State, Nigeria, where trust in national and regional authorities was limited, but where grassroots leaders and citizen-driven initiatives emerged as more effective agents of societal mobilization. A key contribution here is its call for 'hybrid' systems of governance, where national, state and local level leaders work collaboratively in hybrid forms, rather than in the 'top down' manner in which states and national leaders more typically try and operate.

Next, is *Social Distancing and Distanced Societies: A Case Study of Leadership in the Early Days of COVID-19 in South Africa* by Abigail Riggs. Riggs' study compares the responses of two socioeconomically distinct communities in Durban: Inanda, a predominantly working-class township, and Durban North, a middle-class suburb. Using social media analysis and interviews, the paper highlights how pre-existing

inequalities shaped perceptions of the pandemic and compliance with government regulations. The work underscores the critical role of trust in leadership and the limitations of relying solely on coercive measures to enforce compliance.

Mutuality and Power: An Analysis of Non-State Actors Influence in Mitigating the Negative Consequences of State Response to COVID-19 on Adolescent Girls in Kenya by Ivy Wahito, focus on the impacts of the pandemic on adolescent girls, a group often missed in academic literature. The study examines the patriarchal power dynamic that sustains Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) and led to the spike in teenage pregnancies in Nairobi and Machakos. It showcases how emergent leadership models offer hope for gradual societal progress, despite the myriad of logistical and cultural challenge they encounter in their work.

Finally, Guinean leadership in the face of crisis, from Ebola to COVID-19, by Aminatou Diallo, demonstrates the disparities within Guinea's healthcare system and the continuous failure towards the needs of the Guinean population. The analysis finds a lack of leadership emergence, evidenced by the failure to build mutuality with the needs of the population.

The commentary piece, *South Sudanese Youth Agency in a Time of COVID-19*, by Margaret LoWilla, reflects on the role of youth movements in South Sudan, where national leadership was largely absent during the pandemic. Her commentary underscores the importance of integrating youth leaders into national peacebuilding and state-building processes, both during and beyond crisis moments.

In our Leadership in practice series, *A Taoist Perspective on China's Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy and Implementation* by Kaiyu Fang, explores how Taoist principles, deeply embedded in Chinese cultural and philosophical traditions, may have influenced public perceptions of the government's Zero-COVID policies. The paper offers a unique, non-Western framework for understanding leadership, emphasizing the importance of culturally specific analyses.

Finally, the policy brief, *Mutual Aid and COVID-19 in England: Examining Community Practices of Survival*, Awino Okech and Wadeisor Rukato examines how Black communities in England relied on mutual aid networks to navigate the pandemic. It provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, emphasizing the need to empower local organizations and leverage community-based knowledge in future crises.

This special issue demonstrates that effective leadership during crises requires a combination of robust infrastructure, societal trust, and the ability to adapt to diverse contexts. While global leadership often appeared absent during COVID-19, these papers highlight the power of emergent leaders and grassroots initiatives in addressing societal challenges. They each identify the significance of trust and tailored responses in fostering societal mobilisation. As we look back on the pandemic, these case studies offer valuable lessons for leadership theory and practice, both for future crises and for the ongoing study of leadership in diverse global contexts.