

Navigating Digital Change during COVID-19: The Role of Leadership in Southern African Parliaments

Mwaula Solopi

PhD Student, Institute of Distance Education, University of Zambia.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.90400385>

Received: 11 April 2025; Accepted: 15 April 2025; Published: 17 May 2025

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic posed an unprecedented challenge to governance institutions worldwide, compelling parliaments to rapidly shift from traditional processes to digital operations. In Southern Africa, this transition highlighted the critical role of leadership in enabling digital transformation under pressure. This study investigates how digital leaders within Southern African Development Community (SADC) parliaments navigated the complexities of this shift, including infrastructural limitations, outdated policies, limited budgets, and varying levels of digital literacy.

Using a qualitative research design, data were collected through focus group discussions with 23 digital leaders from 13 national parliaments and one regional parliamentary body. The Digital Transformation Leadership Framework guided the analysis, focusing on leadership elements such as strategic vision, change management, stakeholder engagement, and innovation.

The findings reveal that digital transformation was not solely a technological process but a leadership-driven effort. Leaders played a pivotal role in policy adaptation, fostering innovation, securing resources, supporting capacity building, and repositioning ICT departments as strategic actors. Notably, the creation of ICT committees, digital champions among parliamentary leadership, and regional collaboration initiatives contributed to more resilient and inclusive governance models.

The study concludes that strong, adaptive leadership is essential for successful digital transformation in parliaments—especially during times of crisis. It recommends institutionalizing digital leadership roles and aligning national ICT strategies with regional frameworks to ensure long-term digital governance resilience across the SADC region.

Keywords: Digital Leadership, Digital Transformation, Southern African Parliaments, COVID-19, E-Governance Strategies, ICT Policy Adaptation

INTRODUCTION

The rapid onset of the COVID-19 pandemic presented an unprecedented challenge to governance institutions worldwide. Southern African Parliaments, like their counterparts globally, faced the urgent need to transition from traditional operational models to digital frameworks. This transition was critical in ensuring legislative continuity while adhering to public health protocols, such as social distancing and lockdowns. Leadership played an integral role in orchestrating this digital shift, influencing policy adaptations, resource allocations, and stakeholder engagement.

Leadership in digital transformation extends beyond mere adoption of technology—it involves fostering an environment that encourages innovation, embraces change management, and ensures the seamless integration of digital tools into parliamentary operations. The ability of parliamentary leaders to navigate the complexities of digital transformation determined the efficiency, transparency, and resilience of legislative functions during the crisis.

This study explores the pivotal role of leadership in the digital transformation of Southern African Parliaments, drawing insights from parliamentary ICT leaders and policymakers. It examines the strategies employed by leaders to overcome infrastructural, financial, and technological challenges. Additionally, the study evaluates how leadership decisions shaped the long-term sustainability of digital governance initiatives in the region. By assessing leadership's influence on digital governance, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how effective leadership fosters institutional resilience and technological advancement in parliamentary systems. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted unprecedented changes in governance institutions worldwide, and Southern African Parliaments were no exception. The crisis necessitated rapid digital transformation to maintain legislative functions while adhering to public health protocols. Strong leadership was essential in navigating technological adoption, stakeholder engagement, and financial constraints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The role of leadership in digital transformation has been a subject of extensive study across governance, business, and public administration fields. Digital transformation is often driven by leadership that fosters innovation, develops policies to guide change, and ensures strategic alignment with technological advancements. Research indicates that strong leadership is essential in mitigating resistance to change, optimizing resources, and fostering a culture of continuous improvement (Westerman, Bonnet, & McAfee, 2014).

Transformational leadership theory, as proposed by Bass (1985), has been widely applied in digital transformation studies. Northouse (2018) highlights that leaders who exhibit transformational qualities, such as vision, intellectual stimulation, and inspirational motivation, are better positioned to drive technological changes. Similarly, Mergel et al. (2019) argue that leadership in digital governance should prioritize agility, adaptability, and stakeholder engagement to ensure the success of digital initiatives.

In the context of public sector digital transformation, Gil-Garcia et al. (2020) emphasize the need for structured leadership that supports policy frameworks, technological infrastructure, and human capital development. According to the World Bank (2020), digital transformation in governance is most effective when leaders proactively integrate ICT strategies into policy and decision-making processes, ensuring institutional resilience during crises.

Digital Transformation in Governance

Governments worldwide have increasingly recognized the necessity of digital transformation to improve service delivery, transparency, and efficiency. Ebrahim and Irani (2005) discuss e-governance as a tool for enhancing citizen engagement and streamlining governmental operations. The European Commission (2018) highlights that digital transformation in governance requires legislative frameworks that support cybersecurity, data privacy, and interoperability of digital systems. The African Union's Agenda 2063 identifies digital transformation as a cornerstone for achieving inclusive and sustainable development (AU, 2021). This is echoed in the African Union Digital Transformation Strategy 2020–2030, which outlines the need for member states to develop digital leadership capacities that can address both infrastructural gaps and policy fragmentation.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has also recognized this need through its SADC Digital Transformation Strategy and Action Plan 2020–2030, which urges member states to prioritize e-governance and digital infrastructure. The strategy specifically calls for strengthening leadership in digital policy development and implementation, including within legislative institutions.

Research from Heeks and Bailur (2007) suggests that successful digital transformation in public institutions depends on leadership's ability to align digital initiatives with broader governance objectives. The rapid shift to digital operations during the COVID-19 pandemic underscored the role of leadership in adapting to crises while maintaining operational continuity (World Bank, 2020).

Leadership in Digital Transformation in Southern African Parliaments

In Southern Africa, leadership played a crucial role in navigating digital transformation, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Sithole and Moyo (2021) identify key challenges that hindered digital governance in the region, including infrastructural deficits, budgetary constraints, and digital literacy gaps. These findings align with SADC's 2021 Regional ICT Indicators Report, which highlighted uneven broadband penetration and limited digital public services in member states. To overcome these barriers, digital leaders in Southern African parliaments had to advocate for policy adaptations, resource allocations, and the adoption of virtual legislative processes to ensure continuity in governance.

Research indicates that the success of digital transformation in the region depended on leadership's ability to mobilize support for ICT investments and capacity-building initiatives (Gil-Garcia et al., 2020). The introduction of ICT committees in parliaments facilitated cross-sector collaboration and enabled the institutionalization of digital governance strategies. One of the most notable leadership interventions was the designation of ICT champions within parliamentary leadership, ensuring that digital transformation was prioritized at the highest levels of decision-making (World Bank, 2020). These actions reflect the African Union's call for "digital champions" within government institutions—individuals who actively advocate and drive digital innovation from within senior leadership (AU, 2021).

Examples of country-level initiatives, such as Zambia's Smart Zambia e-Government Strategy and Namibia's e-Parliament initiatives, show that national governments also prioritized the institutionalization of ICT leadership roles in legislative bodies.

Challenges and Opportunities

The transition to digital governance in Southern African parliaments faced several challenges. Sithole and Moyo (2021) note that financial constraints limited the ability of some parliaments to invest in robust digital infrastructures. The SADC ICT Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan (RIDMP, 2020) acknowledges this funding gap and proposes regional collaboration to share infrastructure and technical resources. Additionally, disparities in internet connectivity, especially in rural areas, posed obstacles to full-scale digital implementation. Nevertheless, leadership initiatives, such as digital training programs and strategic partnerships with technology providers, helped bridge some of these gaps.

A major opportunity that emerged was the increased regional collaboration on digital governance. Several Southern African parliaments participated in knowledge-sharing forums and collaborative ICT projects, leveraging regional expertise to accelerate digital adoption (World Bank, 2020). Leadership efforts in fostering innovation and promoting digital literacy played a significant role in ensuring that digital transformation initiatives were not only reactive but also sustainable in the long term.

The literature suggests that leadership is a fundamental determinant of successful digital transformation in governance. Strong leadership facilitates strategic decision-making, policy alignment, and stakeholder engagement, all of which are critical for the adoption of digital tools in parliamentary operations. In Southern Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic served as a catalyst for digital transformation, with parliamentary leaders playing a key role in navigating infrastructural and policy challenges. Future research should explore how leadership models in digital transformation can be further institutionalized to enhance governance efficiency beyond crisis scenarios.

Theoretical framework

The digital Transformation Leadership Framework was used to examine the strategies employed by digital leaders to navigate the digital changes during COVID-19. It provided a structured approach to understanding and guiding the leadership aspects of digital transformation initiatives. It also emphasizes the importance of leadership in driving and managing the transformation process, addressing challenges, and leveraging opportunities presented by emerging technologies.

In the context of this article on the strategies to navigating digital transformation in Southern African Parliaments during the COVID-19 pandemic, a digital transformation leadership framework provided a conceptual lens to examine and analyze the leadership practices and strategies employed by digital leaders. This framework encompassed several key elements:

1. **Vision and Strategy:** Effective digital leaders articulate a clear vision for digital transformation and develop a strategic roadmap to guide the implementation process. They align digital initiatives with the overall goals and objectives of the parliamentary institution.
2. **Change Management:** Digital transformation often involves significant changes in processes, systems, and organizational culture. Digital leaders play a crucial role in managing change, fostering a positive mindset, and promoting a culture of innovation and collaboration.
3. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Successful digital transformation requires the engagement and buy-in of various stakeholders, including parliamentarians, staff, and citizens. Digital leaders should establish effective communication channels, build relationships, and address concerns to ensure stakeholder support and participation.
4. **Technological Expertise:** Digital leaders need to possess a strong understanding of emerging technologies and their potential impact on parliamentary operations. They should stay updated with technological advancements, assess their relevance to the parliamentary context, and make informed decisions regarding technology adoption and implementation.
5. **Organizational Culture:** Digital leaders should foster a culture that embraces digital transformation and promotes continuous learning, experimentation, and adaptation. They create an environment that encourages innovation, collaboration, and agility.
6. **Data-driven Decision Making:** Digital transformation generates vast amounts of data. Digital leaders leverage data analytics and insights to make informed decisions, monitor performance, and drive evidence-based policy development and governance.

By considering these elements within a digital transformation leadership framework, we examined how digital leaders in Southern African Parliaments have approached and executed their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. This framework provided a comprehensive lens to analyze the leadership strategies, challenges, and outcomes of digital transformation efforts in parliamentary contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective leadership in digital transformations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This section explains the tools used for data collection and the measures taken to ensure the validity of this research. The article's study used a pragmatic research philosophy and employed a qualitative approach, utilizing data from focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews, which were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The qualitative method, mainly focus group discussions, provided an opportunity to dive deeper into the experiences and perceptions of digital leaders. These discussions allowed a richer understanding of the context and nuances shaping their views and experiences.

The study aimed to include representation from all sixteen (16) member parliaments of the Southern African Development Community (SADC), targeting senior ICT managers and leaders directly involved in digital transformation. The selection criteria focused on participants who had (i.) Direct involvement in planning, implementing, or overseeing digital transformation initiatives within their parliamentary context and (ii.) a leadership role in navigating challenges such as resource allocation, stakeholder engagement, and change management during the transition to digital processes.

Before the study, emails and other electronic media messages were sent to ICT departments of parliaments in each SADC country to obtain the number of members involved in digital transformation. The information

obtained from the 13 countries and one regional body (SADC-PF) indicated that about thirty-two (32) digital leaders within the ICT departments of parliaments are involved in digital transformation, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Digital Leaders involved in Digital Transformation within ICT Departments in the SADC Region Parliaments. (Solopi, 2024)

| item | Country | # of Digital Leaders involved in Digital Transformation within Parliament ICT. | Target (Maximum of 2 per Parliament) | Participants |
|------|------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|--------------|
| 1 | Angola | 4 | | 2 |
| 2 | Botswana | 1 | | 1 |
| 3 | Comoros | No response | | None |
| 4 | Democratic Republic of Congo | No response | | None |
| 5 | Eswatini | 1 | | 1 |
| 6 | Lesotho | 2 | | 2 |
| 7 | Madagascar | 3 | | 2 |
| 8 | Malawi | 2 | | 2 |
| 9 | Mauritius | 2 | | 2 |
| 10 | Mozambique | 3 | | 2 |
| 11 | Namibia | 1 | | 1 |
| 12 | Seychelles | 1 | | 1 |
| 13 | Tanzania | No response | | None |
| 14 | South Africa | 5 | | 2 |
| 15 | Zambia | 3 | | 2 |
| 16 | Zimbabwe | 3 | | 2 |
| 17 | SADC-PF | 1 | | 1 |
| | Totals | 32 | | 23 |

The sample size for this study was thoughtfully selected to provide a balanced representation across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region while ensuring the data's integrity and reliability. From the identified population of thirty-two (32) digital leaders involved in digital transformation, a maximum of two (2) participants per parliament was selected to form part of the study sample. This restriction on participants was implemented to prevent the overrepresentation of any single parliament and to avoid skewing the results. As a result, the final sample size consisted of twenty-three (23) digital leaders representing a diverse mix of countries and their experiences with digital transformation in parliamentary settings, as shown in Table 2.

The sample size was shaped by practical factors related to data collection. It was important to ensure that digital leaders from smaller parliaments and those with limited ICT staff were represented just as much as

those from larger, more technologically advanced parliaments. This fair distribution allowed for a well-rounded comparative analysis across the region.

Table 2. Summary of Sample Size (Solopi, 2024)

| Description | Number |
|-------------------------------------|--------|
| Total Digital Leaders Identified | 32 |
| Maximum Participants per Parliament | 2 |
| Total Participants in Final Sample | 23 |

The study kept a practical and representative sample size, allowing for effective data collection while reflecting the varied experiences of digital leaders in the SADC region. This careful approach improves the study's ability to provide valuable insights into the impact of digital leadership on changes within parliamentary ICT departments.

The data collection process done by first sending an electronic survey via email to the selected participants. And then the second part involved follow-up discussions with a smaller group of participants in focus groups. The sessions took place online, allowing people from different locations across the SADC region to participate without geographic limitations. The qualitative data sought look into how leaders confronted various challenges, including resistance to technology, limited resources, and the intricate nature of socio-political environments. The discussion covered several key topics, such as how to effectively engage with stakeholders, promote collaboration, tackle resistance to change, and the valuable lessons learned during the transformation process.

The qualitative data from focus group discussions and open-ended survey responses was analysed using the following procedure: Transcription: Audio recordings of focus groups were transcribed using the Google Cloud service of Audio to Text Artificial Intelligence (AI) software to convert the audio to text. This was then read and cleaned to ensure it represented the focus group discussion correctly. Further, we conducted data familiarisation by reading through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the content. This was followed by coding the data and developing initial codes by identifying meaningful segments of text related to leadership, strategies, and digital transformation. These were then grouped into broader categories and sub-categories to identify patterns and relationships. Then, thematic analysis was done on the data to identify and develop key themes that emerge from the data that relate to the research questions using Nvivo and AILYZE software.

During this study, we obtained informed consent from participants and ensured strict confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. Further, we adhered to ethical guidelines and protocols for research involving human participants. This section establishes a strong foundation for understanding the study's findings and implications for leadership in the digital age by presenting a clear and transparent methodology.

FINDINGS

This section shares what the study found and provides discussions, especially regarding the role of digital leaders in helping parliaments in Southern Africa go digital during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the pandemic forced parliaments to stop meeting in person, digital leaders stepped up to guide the shift to virtual platforms. They helped keep things running by choosing the right tools, updating outdated processes, and finding creative ways to work around tight budgets and poor internet access. These leaders also made sure that members and staff who weren't used to technology got the support and training they needed. The findings stand out because digital transformation wasn't just about technology—it was about leadership. These leaders helped bring people on board, encouraged collaboration across departments, and ensured digital change became part of the bigger strategy. They played a key role in turning a crisis into an opportunity for growth and modernization.

The following sections examine the study's results concerning the role of digital leaders. It brings out the challenges digital leaders faced, their strategies, and their impact on how parliaments operate today.

Critical Role of Digital Leaders in Implementing Digital Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to digital platforms in Southern African Parliaments, driven by the decisive actions of digital leaders. These leaders played a pivotal role in selecting and implementing the appropriate digital tools to facilitate parliamentary functions during the pandemic. Their ability to make swift decisions and adopt new technologies was essential in maintaining the legislative process. This was reaffirmed by results from the study that indicated their pivotal role in navigating the uncharted waters of digital transformation. For example, the participant stated,

"The transition underlined the critical role of leadership in navigating through these uncharted waters, demonstrating that with proactive and visionary leadership, the challenges of digital transformation can be transformed into Stepping Stones towards a more resilient and intrusive parliamentary system." (Solopi, 2024)

This comment highlights how proactive and visionary leadership was essential in turning challenges into opportunities for a more resilient parliamentary system. Further, the urgency of the pandemic accelerated the adoption of digital tools and platforms for remote work, communication, and collaboration in parliaments as stated by various participants,

"We were to see an encouraged adoption of digital tools and platforms for remote work communication and collaboration, so I think from the advent of COVID-19 and the subsequent times we were to see the aspect of embracing technology, and I think that's been quite very clear." (Solopi, 2024)

"Remote working, remote voting and hybrid sitting in hybrid mode this is becoming the normal. It was not the normal, but it's the normal nowadays, so this, I believe now, would be part of our service that we would be giving to our clients." (Solopi, 2024)

"The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated a rapid shift to digital platforms in Southern African Parliaments, driven by the decisive actions of digital leaders." (Solopi, 2024)

"The integration of technology and digital solutions played a crucial role in ensuring the continuity of parliamentary functions while adhering to health and safety protocols." (Solopi, 2024)

These quotes emphasized how the pandemic prompted parliaments to quickly adopt digital solutions to ensure business continuity and how digital tools have become an integral part of parliamentary services, enabling remote participation and hybrid sittings. Due to this acceleration in the adoption of technology, digital leaders had to be agile in ensuring the implementation of digital tools. The legislative process had to be maintained, and digital leaders needed to be able to act quickly and use new technologies.

Overcoming Challenges

The transition to digital platforms was not without its challenges, but digital leaders were instrumental in overcoming these obstacles. They had to ensure that parliamentary operations could continue smoothly, even in the face of significant challenges.

"The transition to digital platforms was not without its challenges, but digital leaders were instrumental in overcoming these obstacles." (Solopi, 2024).

Adapting Existing Rules & Policies

One of the significant challenges faced by digital leaders in Southern African Parliaments during the COVID-19 pandemic was the need to adapt existing policies and procedures to support digital transformation. For example, some participants mentioned that

"Old rules and policies were a hindrance to achieving digital transformation." (Solopi, 2024).

"The complexity and expense of implementing e-voting due to existing procedures and rules, which were originally designed for a physical presence and paper-based processes." (Solopi, 2024).

These quotes illustrate that digital leaders had to navigate and advocate for changes in outdated policies and procedures to facilitate digital transformation. They emphasized the need to revise all policies and rules with ICT in mind to achieve significant progress. This was a critical aspect of their role in driving and managing these initiatives during the pandemic.

Addressing Budget constraints

Despite the significant progress made, digital leaders faced other challenges, particularly budget constraints, which required innovative solutions and resilience. The participants mentioned,

"Despite budget constraints, the ICT department has worked diligently to optimize existing resources, explore cost-effective solutions, and collaborate with external partners to overcome the budgetary limitations." (Solopi, 2024).

"I would say that a budget for the ICT department is crucial we do have our own budget which is itemised into the main budget and the different items within the main budget the only important thing is that you have to give your estimates of your planning for one year." (Solopi, 2024).

"Where you have a dedicated budget allows the ICT department to allocate resources effectively to support digital transformation initiatives and that is including investments in technology infrastructure, software development, training, maintenance, among others." (Solopi, 2024).

These statements highlight the importance of having a dedicated ICT budget and the need for careful planning and diligent resource optimisation. The digital leaders' efforts made it possible for parliamentary business to run smoothly even in the face of major obstacles. They needed to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic. The study results indicate that digital leaders had to navigate significant budgetary constraints, requiring them to optimize resources and seek cost-effective solutions.

Ensuring Capacity Building & Internet Connectivity

Leaders had to ensure building the capacities of ICT users and overcoming internet connectivity challenges were implemented. These were significant aspects of the digital transformation initiatives. The participants noted,

"It also became apparent that there was need to build the capacities of the ICT users to efficiently and productively work on and through virtual platforms it was not enough to provide gadgets, a continuing challenge as we strive to embrace ICT in our work is related to internet bandwidth and connectivity especially in hard-to-reach parts of our region." (Solopi, 2024).

"People started now talk about ICT in parliament that is according to our Parliament, why am I saying this, we are coming from a background whereby most of the members are coming from the remote areas where ICT trainings are very rare and some of them when they were coming to Parliament they didn't have enough knowledge in terms of how to use ICT." (Solopi, 2024).

This indicates that digital leaders recognized the importance of not just providing technology but also ensuring that users were capable of utilizing it effectively. To ensure that the digital transformation was effective and inclusive, digital leaders focused on capacity building and addressing internet connectivity issues. They understood that providing technology alone was insufficient without the necessary skills and infrastructure to support its use.

Fostering Innovation

Innovation was a key pillar in the digital transformation journey according to the results from the study. Some participants stated that,

"The goal of the Southern African region has been ambitious yet achievable creating Regional Pool of experts, maximizing the potential of cutting-edge digital tools and fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration are not just objectives, they are the pillars upon which the future of a democratic institutions rest." (Solopi, 2024).

"We've also seen also the impact in so far as adaptability is concerned where we have stayed flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances of course leveraging digital tools to pivot quickly as and when need arises." (Solopi, 2024).

"They want to discuss and bring in this topic of change management how they will adapt MPs or other staff who are not willing to go on board of course but for the case of our parliament we were I would say 90% paperless for our business inside the chamber there were some hard cases which were not going for the paperless platforms that we were using but when covid came there was no way out they had to adapt all operations." (Solopi, 2024).

"The leadership's willingness to invest in expensive digital tools without prior test cases demonstrated a commitment to innovation. This risk-taking attitude paid off, as the digital transformation initiatives proved successful." (Solopi, 2024).

These statements emphasize how digital leaders have been instrumental in managing change and encouraging the adoption of digital solutions, even among reluctant parliamentarians and staff. It further underscores the importance of creating a regional pool of experts and fostering a culture of innovation and collaboration. And how the pandemic encouraged a culture of experimentation and innovation within parliaments, with digital leaders playing a key role in promoting this mindset. The leaders had to foster adaptability and leveraged technology to respond swiftly to changing circumstances. The other defining role for digital leaders was the willingness to take calculated risks and invest in new technologies which was crucial for the successful digital transformation of parliaments.

Encouraging Collaboration and Engagement

Digital leaders recognized the importance of collaboration and engagement with various stakeholders, both within and outside parliament, to ensure the success of digital transformation initiatives. Some participants shared,

"In terms of collaboration and engagement with the various stakeholders that is internal and external we've had shared understanding and alignment I think that is quite very key in terms of collaborating the stakeholders that ensures that there is a shared understanding of the goals, the challenges and opportunities associated with digital transformation." (Solopi, 2024).

"Since COVID as well we are now having a Stakeholders Involvement Committee this is very essential because sometimes you think that this stakeholder is not part of that process but eventually when you have already digitalizes process you see that this is a bottleneck and then they were not involved since the beginning and the requirements were not taken into consideration." (Solopi, 2024).

These quotes emphasize the significance of aligning stakeholders and fostering a shared understanding of the objectives, challenges, and opportunities related to digital transformation. They highlighted the importance of stakeholder involvement, from the outset to ensure their requirements are considered and to avoid potential bottlenecks in the digitalization process.

Evolving role of ICT Teams

One of the most significant changes brought about by the pandemic was the heightened recognition of the importance of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in parliamentary operations. Hence there was need for leaders to stir ICT teams to evolve into the new role. Some of the participants stated the following;

“With the covid we came on the forefront but now what I have seen is that the leadership of Parliament and top management of Parliament it’s not only that we are on the forefront but now in most of the projects that is being carried out in Parliament we are being aligned with the strategic goals and objectives of the organization.” (Solopi, 2024).

“For ICT directors, hubs like those provided by Centre of Innovation in Parliament (CIP) have become so crucial: On the one hand the hubs allow ICT directors to find solutions. On the other being part of the hub, has elevated the status or standing of ICT directors, since they are now seen as knowing what other parliaments are doing and they are being asked to get involved in decision making discussions.” (Solopi, 2024).

“ICT management was previously in the background more operational and implementational. Now there is more consultation and alignment with strategic planning and how digital fits in.” (Solopi, 2024).

“Firstly, it is important to acknowledge the significant shift of the ICT department from the back office to the front lines during this period. The ICT department has been instrumental in implementing and managing the technological infrastructure required for remote work, virtual meetings, and digital collaboration.” (Solopi, 2024).

The results from the study emphasized the importance of ICT teams gaining trust, being involved in big decisions, and becoming effective digital transformation partners. These insights highlight the efforts of digital leaders to reposition ICT teams as integral to strategic planning and decision-making processes. This shift was essential for managing digital transformation initiatives effectively during the pandemic.

It further shows that ICT directors are now more involved in strategic discussions and are seen as valuable resources. The increased involvement and elevated status of ICT directors have been pivotal in managing digital transformation initiatives. Their participation in decision-making discussions has ensured that digital strategies are well-informed and aligned with broader parliamentary goals.

Importance of Leadership Support and Engagement

The success of digital transformation initiatives in parliaments relies heavily on the support and engagement of top leadership. As digital leaders its role was to advocate and lobby for the support of top management in the digital transformation agenda. A participant shared an example of how their speaker's support was crucial in addressing connectivity challenges, stating,

“We really had the challenge to be able to work out when there was introduction of the internet kit. Okay just a point where we had the speaker spearhead for us to actually acquire the infrastructure that we needed to use in terms of laying out the connectivity, so the point am making is that she was able to go a step forward for us and negotiate with the government of the republic.” (Solopi, 2024).

This quote illustrates how the speaker's advocacy and engagement with external stakeholders helped overcome infrastructure challenges and facilitate connectivity. Further, the designation of ICT champions within parliamentary leadership has been another key factor in promoting digital transformation as some participants noted,

“Our Speaker is the designated ‘ICT champion’, is engaged and briefed on all trending ICT. Promotes digital training for all ‘BBC’ (born before computer) members and staff.” (Solopi, 2024).

"I think we're talking about advocates where our champion who by then for us was the Hon Mr Speaker was infact identified as our advocate so he would speak on our behalf even when things are so hard, at high level we encountered a lot of problems of course which most of my colleagues could not know and understand or see but I had to refer a lot of the issues to Hon Mr Speaker even late in the night to make sure that he helps me deal with a challenge." (Solopi, 2024).

This highlights the role of ICT champions in advocating for digital solutions and ensuring that all members and staff are equipped with the necessary digital skills. The role of ICT champions has been instrumental in driving digital transformation initiatives. By promoting digital training and staying informed about the latest ICT trends, these champions have ensured that digital transformation is a continuous and inclusive process. Further, the statement highlights how having a strong advocate in leadership can help navigate challenges and ensure the success of digital transformation initiatives. Another participant also emphasized the importance of leadership support, sharing,

"Leadership support was paramount in a migration to digital operations it was a testament to the power of collective action and the potential of shared knowledge and Resources as leaders your row was instrumental in steering this ship amidst the storm ensuring not only the continuity of legislative duties but also safeguarding the Democratic values we hold dear." (Solopi, 2024).

The study clearly indicates that leadership support was essential in the migration to digital operations. Digital leaders played a key role in advocating and lobbying for top leadership support to ensure that legislative duties continued uninterrupted and democratic values were upheld.

Establishing of ICT Committees and Consultation Processes

The establishment of ICT committees and consultation processes was another strategy employed by digital leaders to drive digital transformation in Southern African Parliaments. The pandemic led to the creation of emergency engagement frameworks that have continued to influence digital transformation efforts. The study participants revealed that,

"During the crisis moments of covid an emergency engagement or decision-making framework emerged, which after covid has remained (legacy). ICT participated and still does in the following meetings where tech, modernization, digital transformation is discussed: High level committee (HLC) with speaker, leader of opposition, leaders of political parties." (Solopi, 2024).

"There is a clear shift from traditional leadership with respect to digital to a more inclusive leadership. ICT is now also seen at high level committees, rather than only under the Clerk or SG, or even lower." (Solopi, 2024).

This shows that the frameworks established during the pandemic have had a lasting impact, ensuring continued ICT involvement in strategic discussions. The establishment and continuation of these emergency frameworks have been crucial in managing digital transformation initiatives. They have ensured that ICT and digital leaders remain integral to strategic discussions, facilitating ongoing modernization and digital transformation efforts. This further indicates that digital leaders are now part of high-level committees, ensuring that digital transformation is a priority at the highest levels of parliamentary leadership. This inclusive approach has been essential in driving digital transformation initiatives, as it ensures that digital strategies are supported and prioritized by top parliamentary leaders, facilitating smoother implementation and greater alignment with overall governance goals.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand how digital leaders helped Southern African Parliaments manage a rapid digital transformation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that this transformation wasn't just about adopting new technologies—it was about the people who led the change. These leaders had to step up,

make quick decisions, and guide their teams through a completely new way of working. Some strategies leaders engage to mitigate the challenges are highlighted in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Summary of Challenges and Leadership Strategies in Digital Transformation in Southern African Parliaments

| Challenge | Leadership Strategy/Response |
|---|--|
| Outdated rules and policies | Advocated for policy reform to enable virtual sittings and e-voting |
| Budget constraints | Optimized available resources, planned cost-effective solutions, and lobbied for dedicated ICT budgets |
| Digital illiteracy | Launched digital training for MPs and staff, including targeted support for older members |
| Poor Internet connectivity | Negotiated with governments for infrastructure improvements; introduced mobile kits and hybrid setups |
| Resistance to change | Promoted inclusive stakeholder engagement and demonstrated success stories |
| Lack of Strategic ICT Integration | Repositioned ICT departments as strategic partners in high-level decision-making |
| Fragmented Collaboration | Established ICT committees, regional hubs (e.g., CIP), and cross-parliamentary knowledge-sharing |
| Need for Innovation under pressure | Took calculated risks with new technologies and promoted a culture of adaptability |
| Siloed Decision-Making | Encouraged participatory governance through emergency frameworks and inclusive leadership |

When we compare the findings to what other researchers have said in the literature, we see a lot of similarities. For example, leadership experts like Bass and Northouse talk about transformational leaders—visionary, inspiring others, and willing to take risks to move forward. That’s exactly what many of these digital leaders did. They didn’t just manage technology—they changed mindsets, pushed for updated rules, and created space for innovation even in the middle of a crisis.

The study also confirmed that a strong strategy, openness to change, and inclusive leadership were essential. Leaders weren’t just thinking about ICT—they were thinking about people. They involved parliamentary staff, trained members who weren’t familiar with digital tools, and made sure everyone had a role in the transition. These findings match up with the Digital Transformation Leadership Framework used in this study, which discusses setting a vision, managing change, engaging stakeholders, encouraging innovation, and using data to guide decisions.

This research also ties in well with regional efforts from groups like the African Union and SADC. Both have emphasized the importance of digital leadership and creating strong policies to support digital governance. The parliaments in this study responded to those calls by forming ICT committees, embracing regional knowledge-sharing, and creating long-term strategies for digital operations.

Limitations

Of course, no study is perfect. One limitation here is the number of participants. While the 23 digital leaders included came from various countries, not all SADC member states were represented. That means we might have missed some important experiences—especially from the three (3) countries that didn’t respond. Further,

the study was conducted in English, which may have limited participation from non-English-speaking countries or individuals within the SADC region. The diversity of insights may have been impacted by this linguistic restriction, which may have omitted important viewpoints, especially from stakeholders who speak Portuguese and French.

Another point to note is that this study is based on people's experiences. While their insights are valuable, there's always a chance of bias—people may remember things differently or present their work more favourably. Finally, this research focused on what happened during and shortly after the pandemic. We don't yet know how sustainable some of these changes will be over the long term.

Future works

Future studies can explore a lot more. For example, researchers could follow up in a few years to see how well these digital changes have held up over time. It would also be useful to look at parliaments that didn't manage the transition to learn what challenges held them back.

Other areas worth exploring include how well digital training programs are working, how inclusive these new digital systems are (especially for women and rural communities), and whether citizens feel more engaged with parliaments now that more processes are online.

In short, this study shows that leadership made all the difference. Technology was just one part of the puzzle—what really mattered was how leaders brought people together, pushed through challenges, and built a new way of working that could last beyond the crisis.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that digital transformation in Southern African Parliaments during the COVID-19 pandemic was neither accidental nor purely technological—it was leadership-driven. Digital leaders were central to guiding this transformation at a time when parliaments were forced to pivot quickly to maintain legislative functions under strict public health restrictions. The study emphasizes that effective leadership—characterized by vision, adaptability, collaboration, and innovation—was the critical ingredient that made this transition possible.

Digital leaders played a crucial role in shaping how parliaments responded to the crisis. They facilitated the rapid adoption of digital platforms, advocated for necessary changes to outdated policies, and ensured that ICT strategies were aligned with broader parliamentary goals. Their ability to navigate resource constraints, policy gaps, and varying levels of digital readiness across institutions showcases the importance of leadership that is both strategic and people-centered.

A key insight from the study is the way digital leaders redefined the role of ICT teams. Traditionally seen as back-end support, these teams emerged as strategic partners, working closely with top management and parliamentary leadership. This shift was not only necessary during the pandemic but has proven to be a sustainable model for long-term digital governance. ICT teams are now more integrated into high-level decision-making structures, a move that enhances the overall agility and resilience of parliamentary operations.

The research also highlights the broader cultural shifts led by these digital champions. Leaders fostered a culture of collaboration and innovation by engaging stakeholders early and promoting inclusivity—especially in bridging the digital literacy gap among members of parliament and staff. The commitment to building capacity, particularly for those less familiar with digital tools, reflects an inclusive leadership approach that prioritizes people alongside technology.

Moreover, the pandemic created new opportunities for regional collaboration, with digital leaders leveraging networks like the Centre for Innovation in Parliament (CIP) and other platforms to share knowledge, align strategies, and pool expertise. This regional cooperation has laid the foundation for a more connected and

collaborative digital governance ecosystem in Southern Africa—an outcome that is likely to have lasting benefits well beyond the pandemic.

One of the most significant legacies of this transformation is the institutionalization of digital governance practices. Emergency frameworks and ICT committees formed during the crisis have continued to influence policy and planning, embedding digital transformation into the core functions of parliament. These frameworks have helped parliaments move from reactive responses to proactive planning, with digital strategies now viewed as essential to legislative effectiveness and democratic resilience.

Ultimately, this study affirms that leadership is not just a supporting factor in digital transformation—it is the driving force. The lessons learned from Southern African Parliaments offer valuable insights for other governance institutions aiming to navigate digital change. Strong, inclusive, and visionary leadership—combined with strategic investments in people, processes, and technology—is essential to building future-ready parliaments that can thrive in times of crisis and beyond.

As digital transformation continues to evolve, future efforts must build on this momentum by deepening leadership capacity, expanding regional collaboration, and ensuring that digital innovation remains responsive to the needs of citizens and democracy itself. The experience of Southern African Parliaments during the pandemic offers a powerful example of what is possible when leadership meets technology with purpose and direction.

Findings from this study underscore the indispensable role of leadership in driving digital transformation during crises. Leaders played a pivotal role in decision-making, overcoming infrastructural challenges, repositioning IT as a strategic function, and fostering innovation.

REFERENCES

1. African Union. (2021). Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Retrieved from <https://au.int/en/agenda2063>
2. African Union. (2020). Digital Transformation Strategy for Africa (2020–2030). African Union Commission.
3. Albrecht, A. (2017). Leadership 4.0: Virtuelle Organisationsformen. In Jung, H.; Kraft, P. (Eds.) *Digital vernetzt. Transformation der Wertschöpfung*. Carl Hanser Verlag, München.
4. Ansell, C., Sorensen, E., & Torfing, J. (2021). The COVID-19 pandemic as a game changer for public administration and leadership? The need for robust governance responses to turbulent problems. *Public Management Review*, 23(7), pp. 949-960. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14719037.2020.1820272>
5. Babbie, E. (2020). *The Practice of Social Research* (15th ed.). Cengage Learning.
6. Barrutia, J. M., & Echebarria, C. (2021). Effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on public managers' attitudes toward digital transformation. *Technology in Society*, 67, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.techsoc.2021.101776>.
7. Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations*. Free Press.
8. Bass, B. M. (1990). From transactional to transformational leadership: Learning to share the vision. *Organizational Dynamics*, 18(3), 19-31.
9. Bryman, A. (2016). *Social Research Methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press.
10. Deloitte. (2021). *The future of leadership: Digital leadership in the age of disruption*. Deloitte Insights.
11. Dwianto, A. R., Mutiarin, D., & Nurmandi, A. (2021). Assessing E-Leadership in the Public Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic in ASEAN. *Jurnal Kebijakan & Administrasi Publik*, 26(2), pp. 90-111.
12. Ebrahim, Z., & Irani, Z. (2005). E-government adoption: Architecture and barriers. *Business Process Management Journal*, 11(5), 589–611
13. El Sawy, O. A., Kræmmergaard, P., Amsinck, H., & Vinther, A. L. (2016). How LEGO Built the Foundations and Enterprise Capabilities for Digital Leadership. *MIS Quarterly Executive*, 15(2), 141-166.
14. European Commission. (2018). *Digital Transformation Scoreboard 2018: EU businesses go digital: Opportunities, outcomes, and uptake*. Publications Office of the European Union.

15. European Commission. (2018). eGovernment Benchmark 2018: Trust in government. Publications Office of the European Union.
16. Gil-Garcia, J. R., Helbig, N., & Ojo, A. (2020). Digital Government and Public Management. *Public Administration Review*.
17. Gil-Garcia, J. R., Dawes, S. S., & Pardo, T. A. (2020). Digital government and public management research: Finding the crossroads. *Public Management Review*, 22(5), 633–656.
18. Grover, V., Chiang, R. H. L., Liang, T., & Zhang, D. (2020). Creating business value with digital transformation. *MIS Quarterly Executive*, 19(2), 135-155.
19. Harvard Business Review. (2019). The essentials of managing change. Harvard Business Review Press.
20. Heeks, R., & Bailur, S. (2007). Analyzing e-government research: Perspectives, philosophies, theories, methods, and practice. *Government Information Quarterly*, 24(2), 243-265.
21. Heifetz, R. A., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). The practice of adaptive leadership: Tools and tactics for changing your organisation and the world. Harvard Business Press.
22. Hemachandra, S., Sharkasi, N. (2021). Digital Transformation Induced by the Covid-19 Pandemic. In: Martínez-López, F.J., López López, D. (eds) *Advances in Digital Marketing and eCommerce*. DMEC 2021. Springer Proceedings in Business and Economics. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-76520-0_6
23. ILO. (2020). COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy Immediate responses and policy challenges. ILO Brief. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743623.pdf
24. Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2021). World e-Parliament Report. IPU.
25. Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). (2021). Innovation in Parliaments: The Role of Digital Technologies. Retrieved from <https://www.ipu.org/>
26. Kane, G. C., Palmer, D., Phillips, A. N., & Kiron, D. (2019). The Technology Fallacy: How People Are the Real Key to Digital Transformation. MIT Press.
27. Klein, M. (2020), Leadership Characteristics In The Era Of Digital Transformation. *Business and Management Studies: An International Journal*, 8(1), pp. 883-902 doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15295/bmij.v8i1.1441>
28. Kotter, J. P. (1996). Leading Change. Harvard Business Review Press.
29. Kotter, J. P. (2012). Leading change. Harvard Business Review Press.
30. Martin, A. (2008). Digital literacy and the 'digital society'. In C. Lankshear & M. Knobel (Eds.), *Digital literacies. Concepts policies practices* (pp. 151-176). Peter Lang.
31. McKinsey & Company. (2020). The new leadership playbook for the digital age. McKinsey Digital.
32. McKinsey & Company. (2020). Unlocking success in digital transformations. McKinsey Digital.
33. Mergel, I., Edelmann, N., & Haug, N. (2019). Defining digital transformation: Results from expert interviews. *Government information Quarterly*, 36(4), 101385. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2019.06.002>
34. Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
35. Nachit, H., & Belhacen, L. (2020). Digital Transformation in Times of COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of Morocco. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3645084> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3645084>
36. Northouse, P. G. (2018). *Leadership: Theory and Practice*. Sage Publications.
37. OECD. (2020). Digital government in the public sector: From e-government to smart government. OECD Publishing.
38. Osei-Kojo, A. (2016). E-government and public service quality in Ghana. *Journal of Public Affairs*, pp. 1-8. DOI:10.1002/pa.1620
39. Parliamentary Centre. (2020). Digital transformation and resilience in parliaments during COVID-19. Parliamentary Centre.
40. Prosci. (2021). Best practices in change management. Prosci.
41. Reis, J., Amorim, M., Melao, N., & Matos, P. (2018). Digital transformation: a literature review and guidelines for future research. In A. Rocha, H. Adeli, L. P. Reis, & S. Costanzo, (Eds.), *Trends and advances information systems and technologies*. WorldCIST'18 2018. *Advances in intelligent systems and computing* (pp. 411-421). Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77703-0_41

42. SADC. (2020). SADC Digital Transformation Strategy and Action Plan 2020–2030. Southern African Development Community Secretariat.
43. SADC. (2021). Regional ICT Indicators Report 2021. Southern African Development Community Secretariat.
44. SADC. (2020). ICT Regional Infrastructure Development Master Plan (RIDMP). Southern African Development Community.
45. Schiuma, G., Schettini, E., Santarsiero, F., & Carlucci, D. (2021). The transformative leadership compass: Six competencies for digital transformation success. *Journal of Business Research*, 123, 547-559.
46. Sithole, T., & Moyo, P. (2021). Challenges of Digital Transformation in African Parliaments. *African Journal of Public Administration*.
47. Solopi, M. (2024). Leadership Approaches to Digital Transformation by Digital Leaders in Southern African Parliaments during the Covid-19 Pandemic [Unpublished Doctoral Thesis]. University of Zambia.
48. Solopi, M., Qutieshat, A. (2023). Digital Transformation in the Public Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic and how it was impacted by Leadership: Literature Review. *International Journal of Applied Research in Business and Management*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.51137/ijarbm.2023.4.2.6>
49. United Nations. (2021). Digital government strategies for sustainable development. United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs.
50. Westerman, G., Bonnet, D., & McAfee, A. (2014). *Leading digital: Turning technology into business transformation*. Harvard Business Review Press.
51. World Bank. (2020). Digital government transformation during COVID-19: Trends and innovations. World Bank Group.
52. World Bank. (2020). Digital Governance and Public Engagement. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/>
53. World Bank. (2020). Digital Government Response to COVID-19.
54. World Bank. (2020). E-Government and Legislative Efficiency. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/>
55. World Bank. (2021). Digital Skills for Inclusive Growth. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/>
56. World Bank. (2021). Inclusive Digital Transformation: Tools and Practices for Equitable Access. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org>
57. World e-Parliament Report. (2022). Parliaments after the Pandemic. <https://www.ipu.org/file/15804/download>