



Ethical Leadership and Accountability for Sustainable Development: Referring to Three Kerala Leaders.

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Abstract

This study examines the pivotal role of ethical leadership and accountability in driving sustainable development, positioning sustainability as a safeguard for the progress and evolution of future generations. Utilizing secondary data and an extensive literature reviews, the research focuses on three iconic leaders from Kerala. – V.S Achuthandandan, A. K. Antony, and E. Sreedharan. The paper illustrates how these leaders successfully advanced sustainable development by upholding three fundamental pillars: Political, Administrative, and Social.

Key words :- Leadership, Ethical leadership, Accountability, sustainable development

Introduction

Researchers and practitioners have put forward various definitions to explain what comprise effective leadership. Traditionally, leadership has been analyzed as a type of power that comes from a person's character and values. Early conceptualization describe Leadership is about guiding a group towards common goals, while also addressing individual needs that might hold them back. In the contemporary theories of management, leadership is accepted as a process of influencing people toward the achievement of common goals. Now leadership is characterized by diverse skill set—such as integrity, intelligence, optimism, and enthusiasm—coupled with goal-oriented, participatory decision-making.

Lately, people are focusing more on the ethical dimension of leadership. Ethical leadership emerges from the realization that leadership effectiveness cannot be apart from moral conduct and ethical responsibility. Here leaders influence others through personal integrity, fairness, and accountability. They consistently are modelling ethical behaviour to create a culture of trust. Leading by example, Fairness and respect, accountability, transparent communication, value based decision making and self-awareness are the key characteristics of ethical leadership. This style of leadership is also supported by various theories like transformational leadership theory, servant leadership theory, stakeholder theory and moral development theory.

Accountability in leadership is the obligation of leaders to justify their decisions, actions, and policies in a manner that is transparent, ethical, and aligned with the interests of the followers or the organization they serve. It about owns up to mistakes, learning from them, and taking proactive steps to prevent them in the future; rather, it enclose a proactive commitment to openness, integrity, and responsiveness. Leaders need to be transparent about their decisions, explaining the reasoning behind them, sharing relevant information, and being accountable to stakeholders.

In today's interconnected world Sustainable development is not a distant idea but a practical necessity. It is a comprehensive framework that seeks to balance three interconnected pillars-economic progress, social justice, and environmental stewardship. It emphasizes that growth and prosperity should not come at the expense of human dignity or ecological resilience. Instead, development should prioritize people and the environment, balancing current needs with long-term sustainability. It's about creating a fair, inclusive, equitable and resilient future where everyone thrives

Sustainable development is the framework of progress that satisfies current human wellbeing without exhausting resources or environmental deterioration. It is not simply a policy framework but a moral commitment to balanced economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. Ethical leadership and accountability are central to this vision, ensuring that Leaders need to own their decisions, be transparent about their choices, and act with integrity. This builds trust and ensures decisions benefit everyone, not just a few. Kerala, often celebrated for its high human development indices, offers exemplary models of leadership that embody these values. This paper examines three leaders from Kerala—A. K. Antony, E. Sreedharan, and V.S Achuthanandan—to illustrate how ethical leadership and accountability can drive sustainable development.

1.1 Research problem.

Ethical leadership is the main driving force for an effective leader. Ethical leaders take decisions by evaluating choices through established moral principles, prioritizing long-term stakeholder well-being alongside revenue. They typically follow a structured process: they check the facts, analyse how options impact everyone involved, test for fairness, and remain accountable for the outcomes. They encourage their team members to model this behaviour and build a workplace culture that values transparency, collaboration and inclusion, and where everyone feels safe to share their voice. For sustaining public trust accountability is needed for a leader. Without it, leadership risks becoming, corrupt, authoritarian or detached from the needs of the people. Transparent and accountable leaders foster legitimacy, encourage civic participation, and strengthen institutional resilience. In organizational contexts, accountability enhances employee morale, improves performance, and reduces misconduct. Ethical leadership and accountability are central to the three pillars of sustainable development. That is 1. Environmental protection-protecting natural resources, reducing waste and combating climate change. 2. Social equity – Ensuring health and education equality and decent work for all. 3. Economic growth- Fostering long-term, responsible growth that benefits society. This study was intended to investigate how ethical leadership and accountability is a crucial ingredient in achieving sustainable development. For this we take the example of three leaders from Kerala- A. K. Antony, E. Sreedharan, and V.S Achuthanandan

1.2 Research objective

This study was designed to illustrate the relationship between ethical leadership and Accountability for sustainable development.

1.3 Research Significance

The result of this study will encourage students, scholars, practitioners to appreciate the importance of ethical leadership and accountability for sustainable development.

1.4 Research Hypothesis

This study hypothesizes that ethical leadership and accountability has positive association with sustainable development.

1.5 Research methodology

Secondary sources of information are purely used for this study. It described, summarised and discussed information initially presented in other academic publications sources like journal articles, textbooks, book reviews, blogs, eBooks, etc.

2. Review of literature.

(NkeobunaNnahUgoani & Grace Ukpung Udo, June 13 2024) A study was conducted to identify the relationship between ethical leadership and sustainable development with reference to three Nigerian leaders. It reveals that there is significant positive relationship between ethical leadership and sustainable development. The study also recommends that governments should implement ethical leadership across all departments to foster a culture of integrity, driving better performance and long-term growth

(Modise*, 2025) Explore the link between ethical leadership and successful implementation of sustainable development initiatives. It explains the characteristics of ethical leaders crucial for sustainability are transparency, long-term orientation, and vision and stakeholder inclusivity. It reveals that transformational and servant leadership styles influence employee engagement with sustainability goals. The study concludes that ethical leadership paves the way for a sustainable future. By promoting ethical leadership and collaboration, we can build a world that balances environmental wellbeing, social responsibility, and economic prosperity.

(Emily, Protus Akujah, & Patrick Okanga, 2019/04/30) This study explores how ethical leadership drives sustainable development in developing countries. Key findings of the study are: Ethical leadership is vital for a society's sustainable growth, Nurturing ethical leaders determines development pace, Poor leadership often leads to resource mismanagement, Inclusive decision-making is often lacking, What's missing is leadership with strong morals.

(Tolstoy, Hånell, & Tarnovskaya, 2023) This chapter explore an MNE's implementation of a particular SDG, through an ethical leadership lens. Ethical leadership in this new business landscape is strengthened by virtue ethics. Multinational enterprises with genuine ethical groundings will be equipped to make decision in complex situations where the needs of a variety of stakeholders must be considered.

(Prof Shrisha.K1, 2025) This paper looks at how ethical leadership leads sustainable development by shaping corporate values and decisions that support sustainability. It explores how ethical leaders lodge environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles into policies, promote accountability, and balance ethics with economic pressures. The study finds that while ethical leadership isn't a magic fix, it's crucial for long-term sustainability. To make it work, organizations need to boost ethical leadership through education, stakeholder engagement, and governance reforms.

(Hassan, Mohammed Edan Bani Al khazraje, & Noor Khalil Ibrahim Al-Jubouri, 2023) Explored how ethical leadership impacts sustainable performance. Key findings of the study are: Ethical leadership directly influences sustainable performance, developing ethical leadership skills can boost performance in institutions, the college prioritizes ethical leadership to drive sustainability and leaders understand the importance of ethical leadership for high performance

(Adamu, 2023) Reviewed literature on ethical and sustainable leadership, highlighting its value for business. Key findings of the study are ethical leadership boosts employee commitment, integrity, and trust. It enhances firm reputation and performance. Unethical leadership is destructive and can lead to collapse. Ethical leadership is the

key to tackling modern business challenges like climate change and social injustice.

(Hussam Al Halbusi, 2021) This study analyses whether moral attentiveness strengthens the positive effect of an ethical climate on employees' ethical behaviours, as well as the indirect effect of ethical leadership on employees' ethical behaviours through an ethical climate. The result shows that employees with high moral awareness respond better to ethical climates and leadership

(Slimane, 2012) Analyse the relationship between leadership and sustainable development is very important, because there is no development without leadership especially in the social, human and cultural dimension

3. Ethical Leadership, Accountability and sustainable development:- Conceptual Frame work

3.1 Ethical leadership.

Ethical leadership is the key driving force for an effective leader. Ethical leaders take decisions based on what is best for them or for the bottom line. They encourage their team members to model this behaviour and build a workplace culture that values transparency, collaboration and inclusion, and where everyone feels safe to share their voice. In Ethical leadership decisions are guided by ethical principles rather than short-term gains and are closely connected with value-based leadership. It give importance for doing what is right, just, and fair, even when faced with pressure or adversity.

Core Principles of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership relies on five essential pillars:

- Integrity:- Upholding moral values and maintain alignment between words and actions.
- Fairness & Justice: Ensuring equality, impartiality, and objective decision-making.
- Transparency: Fostering trust through open communication and clear processes.
- Accountability: Taking responsibility for actions, mistakes, and corrective measures.
- Respect for Others: Cultivating inclusivity while honouring human dignity and diverse perspectives.

Role of Ethical Leaders in society

Ethical leaders play a vital role in shaping culture in the society. By adapting ethical behaviour, they set standards for acceptable conduct and influence followers to act ethically. Such leadership helps in minimizing unethical practices like corruption, favouritism, and misuse of power. Ethical leadership is essential in all sectors of the economy like educational institutions, public administration, and governance. Leaders in these sectors mostly influence societal values and public trust. Ethical leadership promotes social justice and fairness, integrity, accountability, and good governance, thereby contributing to societal development and stability.

3.2 Accountability

Without accountability, power can be misused, trust can destroy, and organizational goals may fail to be achieved. It is a fundamental principle which ensures individuals and institutions responsible for their actions and decisions. Accountability in leadership is the obligation of leaders to explain, justify, and take responsibility for their actions. It involves being answerable to the followers and the public. Accountability includes acknowledging success, learning

from mistakes, improving future performance and punishment for wrongdoing. Therefore, accountability is widely acknowledged as a mainspring of good leadership and governance.

Types of Accountability

Accountability is often treated as a buzzword, but in practice, it is the glue that holds individuals, businesses, and societies together. Rather than a singular concept, true accountability is multi-dimensional. Depending on the context—whether you are managing your own workload, steering a corporation, or serving the public.

Modern accountability framework encompasses five core dimensions: *individual* responsibility for personal behaviour; *organizational* execution of strategic objectives; *financial* transparency in fund management; *administrative* adherence to institutional and legal protocols; and *social* responsiveness to broader community and ethical needs.

Role of Accountability in Governance and Society

Accountability plays a crucial role in public administration and governance, accountability is essential for maintaining public trust. In case of organization accountability enhances organizational efficiency and effectiveness. It helps in lining up individual performance with organizational goals. Mechanisms such as performance appraisal systems, reporting mechanisms, and internal controls are used by the organizations to monitor progress and identify areas for improvement. Similarly Government officials and institutions are accountable to citizens for policy decisions, public expenditure, and service delivery. Through compulsory audit, legislative oversight and public reporting system, government ensure responsible governance. Social accountability also empowers citizens to get a voice, demand transparency and push for fairness, thereby strengthening democratic system in decision-making processes and demand transparency and fairness, thereby strengthening democratic systems..

Challenges to Accountability

Accountability faces a lot of challenges which prevent individuals or organizations from taking responsibility for actions and outcomes. Major hurdles include lack of clarity in roles, weak monitoring systems, and resistance to responsibility. In some cases, excessive control, Systemic and Legal Weaknesses, Political Challenges, and Psychological Barriers can also hinder creativity and autonomy. Therefore, accountability systems must balance control with flexibility and empowerment.

3.3. Sustainable development.

The concept of sustainable development was first introduced in 1987 with the publication of the Brundtland Report. The report warns the negative environmental consequences of economic growth and globalization, which tried to find possible solutions to the problems caused by industrialization and population growth. The concept aims to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It gives importance to responsible use of natural resources, equitable economic growth, and social inclusion.

Pillars of Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is commonly understood through three interrelated pillars they are: Economic sustainability

Economic sustainability emphasizes on promoting long-term economic growth, fostering innovation, and building resilient infrastructure without negatively impacting social, environmental, and cultural aspects of the community. It promotes efficient use of resources, innovation, and stable economic systems that generate employment and income.

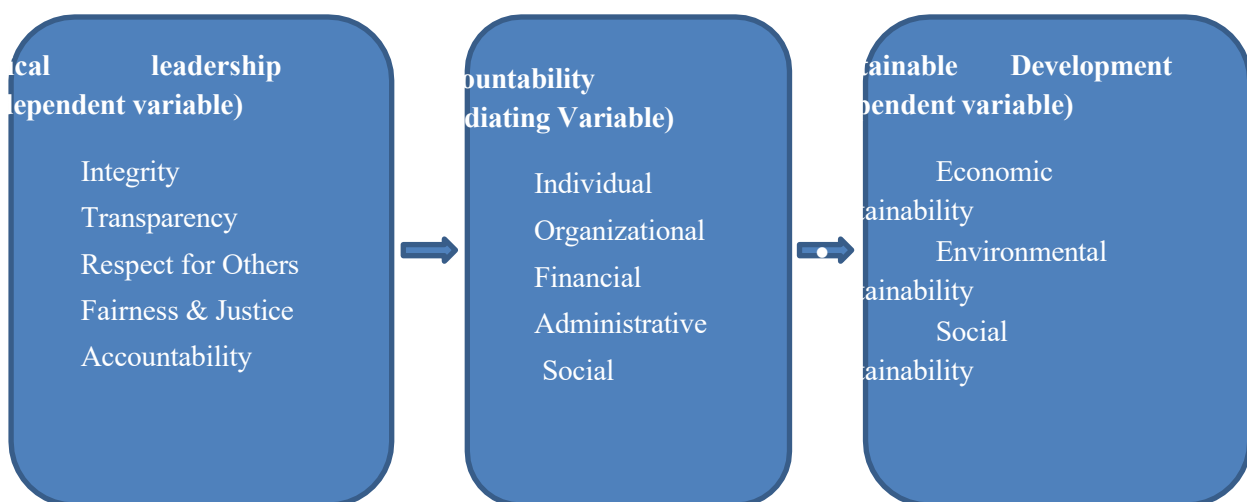
Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability focuses on protecting ecosystems, managing natural resources wisely, addressing climate changes and reducing pollution. It involves adopting practices such as renewable energy use, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation to maintain ecological balance.

Social sustainability

Social sustainability ensures equity, social justice, improve quality of life, and access to basic services such as education, healthcare, and housing. It seeks to irradiate poverty, promote gender equality, and ensure that development benefits all sections of society.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework showing the relationship between Ethical leadership, Accountability and sustainable development



Source: Authors' Designed (2026)

The Most Powerful Legacy of Ethical Leadership in Kerala



Source : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

Based on the provided theoretical framework, accountability serves as the vital bridge connecting ethical leadership to sustainable development. The discussion notes that without ethical leadership, structural institutional weaknesses allow corruption to thrive, distorting economic growth and destroying public trust. Accountability is the active enforcement mechanism of ethical leadership—it transforms abstract values (like integrity and discipline) into measurable outcomes (like human development, infrastructure quality, and environmental sustainability). In the context of Kerala, AK Antony, E. Sreedharan and VS Achuthanandan perfectly illustrate how different dimensions of accountability—political, administrative, and social—drive sustainable development.

Political Accountability: A.K. Antony and the Rule of Law

A.K. Antony's career reflects the enforcement of **political accountability**, where leaders willingly subject themselves and their administrations to intense scrutiny to protect the public trust. Antony practiced a rare form of self-imposed accountability. When his party faced electoral setbacks or internal moral crises under his watch, he repeatedly chose to resign from the Chief Minister's office rather than compromise his ethical position. As Defence Minister, he applied strict accountability to the procurement framework, cancelling massive international defence contracts at the first hint of corruption, ensuring state resources were not diverted into private hands. By prioritizing systemic cleanliness over political survival, Antony institutionalized a culture where public officials feared the consequences of bribery. This stability and respect for the rule of law allowed Kerala to consistently invest in long-term human development programs, secure in the knowledge that public funds were reaching their intended targets.

Administrative Accountability: E. Sreedharan and Project Integrity

E. Sreedharan represents **administrative and professional accountability**, proving that large-scale infrastructure can be delivered ethically. Sreedharan created a revolutionary template for bureaucratic transparency. In projects like the Kochi Metro, he enforced strict timelines, transparent digital bidding, and regular financial audits. He held himself and his team directly accountable for every rupee spent and every day

delayed. He notoriously insulated his execution teams from political patronage, ensuring that promotions and contracts were based strictly on quality and merit rather than bribery or political connections. Infrastructure is the backbone of sustainable development. Because Sreedharan enforced absolute efficiency and zero tolerance for systemic leaks, public utilities were completed on or ahead of schedule. This ensured that the current generation received high-quality, eco-friendly transit systems without hampering future generations with massive, corruption-inflated public debts.

Social Accountability: V.S. Achuthanandan and Public Enforcement

- V.S. Achuthanandan championed **social and environmental accountability**, acting as the public's enforcement mechanism against corporate and political exploitation. Achuthanandan believed that leaders must be held accountable to the environment and the poorest citizens. He took powerful interests to court, utilizing public interest litigation to expose illegal land encroachments, corporate pollution, and political corruption. When he took power as Chief Minister, he militarized, the state's enforcement capacities to reclaim illegally held forest lands from commercial mafias. Sustainable development requires protecting resources so that the "needs of the future generation" are not compromised. By forcing corporate giants and real estate mafias to answer for ecological destruction (such as groundwater depletion and deforestation), Achuthanandan directly protected Kerala's fragile ecosystem. His actions guaranteed that local communities retained their access to food security, clean water, and public lands.

From the above discussion it is cleared that, A.K **Antony** ensured the political environment remained accountable to high ethical standards. E.**Sreedharan** ensured that the bureaucratic and physical infrastructure was accountable to budgets, timelines, and quality. VS.**Achuthanandan** ensured the socio-environmental landscape was accountable to the law and future generations.

Summary Action Matrix

Target Area	Core Strategy	Kerala Model	Leader	Primary Sustainable Outcome
Public Policy	Resignation/Accountability clauses for ethical failures.		A.K. Antony	Preserves public trust and rule of law.
Infrastructure	Merit-based, zero-leakage procurement systems.		E. Sreedharan	Delivers debt-free, high-quality public utilities.
Ecology & Justice	Fast-track prosecution of resource and land mafias.		V.S. Achuthanandan	Protects intergenerational natural wealth.

Findings

1. Ethical leadership is multi-dimensional, not monolithic :-The study reveals ethical leadership does not rely on a single approach; rather, different leaders utilize distinct dimensions (traits, behaviors, skills, or roles) to

achieve public integrity. Here **A.K. Antony** primarily used personal traits to set a moral standard for policy. **E. Sreedharan** relied on technical skills and professional execution to build transparent public utilities. **V.S. Achuthanandan** utilized his political role as an institutional fighter to champion social justice.

2. Accountability reverse structured Institutional weakness: corruption is a symptom of structural weakness that can only be corrected when accountability is actively enforced across three distinct pillars:

1. Political Accountability: Willingness to sacrifice power for principle (A.K.Antony) protects the sanctity of the rule of law.

2. Administrative Accountability: Strict, digital, and merit-based procurement systems (E.Sreedharan) eliminate political patronage and the "competition in bribery."

3. Social/Environmental Accountability: Active legal and physical enforcement against resource exploitation (VS. Achuthanandan) ensures that powerful mafias are held answerable to the public.

3. Ethical leadership acts as the custodian of the future. They ensure that today's decisions do not squander tomorrow's opportunities, well-being and resources, Eg E. Sreedharan ensures Financial sustainability and VS. Achudhanadan ensures Ecological sustainability.

4. The Kerala model demonstrates that high human development can be achieved through ethical leadership and accountability, even in the absence of abundant industrial or natural resources

Recommendations

Based on the ethical leadership style of three Kerala leaders of A.K. Antony, E. Sreedharan, and V.S. Achuthanandan, the following recommendations are :

1. Institutionalize multi-dimensional leadership training: Ethical leadership needs moral traits, administrative skills, and a shift beyond passive codes. For this launch mandatory, continuous leadership programs combining moral reasoning with project management metrics by targeting Civil services academies, Public sector undertaking and public institutions.

2. Implement "Sreedharan-Style" Administrative Transparency: In order to eliminate the "competition in bribery" and neutralize political patronage in public utilities, procurement systems must be structurally insulated. For this implement fully automated, end-to-end digital procurement, open-book accounting, and independent third-party concurrent audits for all mega-infrastructure projects.

3. Strengthen Independent Environmental and social Enforcement : To preserve ecological assets for future generations, the state must empower enforcement mechanisms to act against resource exploitation without political interference. For this government must establish fast-track environmental courts and autonomous anti-encroachment task forces.

Conclusion

Abstract moral values are insufficient for long-term societal progress without structural accountability. By examining the leadership profiles of AK Antony, E. Sreedharan, and VS Achuthanandan, this study concludes that ethical leadership requires actionable frameworks rather than just persuasion to achieve sustainable development. Sreedharan's approach demonstrates that operationalizing morality means executing professional competence with strict integrity. His success relies on shielding engineering and infrastructure projects from political interference, enforcing absolute punctuality, and prioritizing social responsibility. His success proves that technical excellence and ethical discipline are the twin engines of sustainable development. Achuthanandan's leadership reflects a model of uncompromising social accountability. His approach highlights that ethical governance must champion the vulnerable, challenge entrenched mafias, and institutionalize checks and balances. Antony's governance model is rooted in personal integrity, institutional caution, and a deep intolerance for corruption in public life. His tenure illustrates that ethical leadership serves as a crucial moral anchor.

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