

Diversifying humanitarian leadership: we must do better

by Kate Sutton and Pip Henty

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New [research](#) has found that just 38 per cent of the staff of humanitarian agencies think they are being led by diverse leadership teams (conjure images of different ages, genders, nationalities and backgrounds) and only 42 per cent of humanitarian workers believe that leadership teams are inclusive (conjure images of being listened to, appreciated and included).

And the statistics prove that they are right about diversity in the sector.

Humanitarian Advisory Group conducted a survey reaching 1,500 humanitarian workers from 115 countries and also interviewed 24 people to explore the results. Whilst most respondents to the survey were women, men make up 57 per cent of senior leadership roles, and in high and extreme security risk countries, men make up 69 per cent of the most senior positions. Just four per cent of such positions are held by people who identify as having a disability.

Low socio-economic status can also be a barrier to working in the humanitarian sector, skewing the pipeline into leadership roles and leadership teams. According to the survey, 90 per cent of all humanitarian staff have completed an undergraduate or master degree (90 per cent!). This may not be surprising given the way humanitarian jobs are advertised. But stakeholders believe that we need to be clearer about the skill sets that deliver effective humanitarian action and not immediately equate academic achievement with professional competence in humanitarian programming. One respondent stated:

“Socio-economic background among international staff [is important] because looking at how we are recruiting now I see a very homogenous group of young people typically from [one] graduate institute.”

Interestingly, there is a difference between how men and women perceive leadership diversity in the humanitarian sector. Men have a significantly more positive perception of the diversity and inclusiveness of their leadership teams than

women. 54 per cent of surveyed men think their leadership team is mostly or very diverse; only 28 per cent of women think the same.

This research supports sneaking suspicions to date that humanitarian leadership teams that are more diverse and inclusive perform better. Those respondents who felt they had diverse and inclusive leadership teams also felt that their leaders were better at: listening and acting on the views of communities and of colleagues; making decisions and managing risk better; and promoting innovation.

So if we know this to be true, what are we doing about it?

Some organisations are implementing strategies to encourage diversity and inclusiveness. These include internal staff surveys to understand inclusion barriers for different groups, setting up specific networks such as LGBTI networks, establishing recruitment quotas, increasing professional development opportunities, and establishing diversity and inclusion policies and implementation plans. For example, UNHCR has been pioneering a range of approaches to supporting a more diverse and inclusive workplace including launching a staff-led diversity, inclusion and gender equity project. This project collates stories on diversity challenges in the organisation and encourages open discussion of topics such as language inclusion, disability, sexuality, gender and race (documented [here](#)).

What more can be done?

We believe this research provides the basis for three concrete actions to increase diversity and inclusion, and as a result improve leadership team performance.

Have the conversation: Discuss the findings with your colleagues and share it with your leadership teams. Invite open conversations about how diverse and inclusive your teams are, and why. Making this conversation inclusive will involve having programming, leadership, human resources and finance people all in the same room. And making sure the loudest voices aren't the only ones heard.

Invest in change: Diversity and inclusion aren't automatic. We need to allocate funding to improve recruitment and human resource systems to ensure we are drawing on more diverse candidates. Once we have more diverse workforces we need to invest in strong policies and procedures that support their voice and inclusion. This can include a range of policies such as carers leave, parental leave and flexible working policies. But beyond the policies we need to ensure that the culture and attitudes support diversity; we need to allocate time for inclusive conversations and set up systems for staff to provide feedback and resources to adequately respond to and learn from that feedback.

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Track and understand the impact: Learn from how different teams operate and what delivers results for people in crisis. If you are really committed to getting this right we would love to hear from you as we move into the next stage of this research project where we look at the linkages between diversity and performance metrics in the field such as innovation, risk management and accountability to affected populations.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/diversifying-humanitarian-leadership-we-must-do-better-20191114/>