

DIVERSIFYING THE SECTOR

How We Got Here: Our Working Notes

Overview

Multiple studies, whether the [BRIDGE Report in the U.S.](#) or one from [Bond in the U.K.](#), indicate that there is a general lack of diversity in our sector's workforce and an urgent need for improvement. However, while race and ethnicity have been a significant focus of diversity conversations and initiatives within the sector recently—especially in the U.S. context—it is important to acknowledge the innumerable other aspects of identity that contribute to a more holistic understanding of diversity.

Before diving into the nuances of diversifying the sector, it is important to state at the outset that markers of diversity in the United States do not necessarily translate to the global context in which international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) also operate. Some of the points and recommendations made in this section can be applied globally, but others are more focused on the United States, where the majority of InterAction Member organizations have based their headquarters and a significant percentage of their staff. Given that a significant percentage of staff working in the sector are recruited and selected on the basis of donor-influenced program criteria, government funders, international organizations, and foundations can have an outsized impact on this topic for grant implementing organizations.

Many of the other key areas of concern identified throughout InterAction's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Compact materials have contributed to the exclusion of various minority groups from working in international development and humanitarian response. By the same token, improving diversity in the sector as a whole should positively impact the other areas identified throughout this compendium of resources.

Impact

Diversity of viewpoint, background, and lived experience can bring significant benefits to a team, no matter the substance or context of its work. However, it is all the more important in international development and humanitarian response work given the recent push toward greater localization and understanding of the needs, preferences, and local systems of the constituencies NGOs collectively serve.

This section articulates some strategies for greater diversification in the sector, going through the “life cycle” of a typical NGO employee. These strategies must, in many cases, be paired with specific Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and targets that can be measured to demonstrate progress and ensure accountability for that progress—or lack thereof.

Pipeline

While the next generation of employees is [more diverse](#) than any that have come before it, there is no guarantee that a broad cross-section of that population will be attracted to and apply for positions with international non-governmental organization (INGOs). Therefore, the sector must be intentional in developing a diverse pipeline of potential future employees by utilizing partnerships with universities and other organizations that reach diverse populations, such as (in the United States) [Historically Black](#)

Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges, and **Hispanic-serving institutions**. Paid internships and fellowships for early career professionals can offer valuable experience, relationships, and networks that can support the individuals and organizations involved for years to come. However, those trainee experiences must offer real opportunities for learning, growth, and professional development for that investment of time and resources to pay off. Some organizations across the sector already do pay their interns, and—given well-documented barriers to access for unpaid internships—more should follow suit to improve diversity and equity.

Hiring

Recruitment and hiring processes have an outsized impact on the overall diversity of an organization, and so the hiring process is where efforts to diversify workforces typically fall short. Data is key to understanding whether your organization is attracting a diverse set of candidates, shortlisting them, advancing them to interviews, and ultimately selecting them to join your team.

Here are a few key areas or steps in hiring which could positively contribute to diversifying the sector:

- While candidates in the U.S. often are asked to provide demographic information to satisfy federal reporting requirements voluntarily, these standards are relatively low and do not capture the full range of identity markers that would reflect the diversity being sought. Consider requesting additional information from candidates, being clear that providing this information is strictly voluntary, and explaining why you are collecting the data and how it will be used.
- Improve the sourcing process for candidates by looking beyond well-tapped networks for talent. Invest time in developing relationships with diverse networks and then sharing information about jobs with them. Invest financial resources in posting jobs to a set of platforms targeting diverse populations.
- Consider updating the diversity statement used in job descriptions and be sincere in communicating the value of diversity to all potential applicants as well as current and future search committees. More broadly, use language in job postings signaling that diversity, community-building, inclusion, human-centeredness, and full personhood are important principles to achieving your organization's mission.
- Include the salary range in job descriptions for transparency and to counter systemic pay inequities.
- Consider the value of redacting candidate names and the names of any institutions from which they received educational qualifications from application materials to reduce bias before reviewing and shortlisting your candidates.
- Build search committees that can represent a diverse cross-section of your team and the organization. Provide committee members with training on the overall search process and implicit bias.
- In interviews, ensure that the same questions are asked of all candidates to guarantee that each one can be assessed on the basis of the same opportunities. Incorporate DEI-related competencies into interview questions.

During Employment

Selecting and hiring a diverse group of staff within an organization will not have a long-term impact on the sector unless the sector as a whole can retain them, create a sense of internal belonging, offer clear pathways for career growth within or across organizations, and ensure opportunities to enter future leadership positions.

Once hired, an intentional onboarding process, continued emphasis on organizational values, and a welcoming environment are critical. One way to set up new staff for success is by creating an internal mentorship program that can contribute to the onboarding process, create a sense of belonging, and build opportunities for long-term personal and professional growth. Moreover, mentorship programs do not have to be a one-way street in which only new staff benefit from the teachings of more tenured or senior colleagues. Successful mentorship programs will also encourage more experienced employees to listen to and learn from newer hires. Sponsorship programs that are more concretely focused on career advancement and elevating promising employees can also **play a role** in diversifying management and senior leadership over time. In addition, depending on the organization's size, employee resource groups (ERGs) oriented around certain markers of identity (e.g., people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, people with disability) can also contribute to a sense of belonging and community for colleagues.

Another key area for retention is compensation which, if not structured equitably and transparently, can be a reason for internal dissension, mistrust, suspicion, exclusion, and even resignation. Compensation includes salary and benefits (health insurance, life insurance, vacation, parental leave, flexible working arrangements, etc.), along with any related policies. To reassure staff that there are no inequities explainable only by an employee's identity, pay equity studies should be done on a routine basis and the results relayed to staff. Moreover, when it comes to performance evaluations, promotions, and/or special compensation increases, the criteria used to make those should be clear and transparent to minimize the possibility of bias or backdoor inequities.

Finally, when staff reach the end of their tenure with an organization, the organization in question should prioritize conducting exit interviews with departing staff. While an employee's reasons for leaving will differ depending on individual circumstances and may not have anything to do with the organization they are leaving (e.g., being offered a better opportunity, moving, changes to family dynamics, etc.), all those who leave have valuable insights on how to improve a particular organization. And, the only way to capture such knowledge and find ways for improvement is through those exit interviews.

Leadership Development

An internal InterAction assessment done in 2018 showed that a significant challenge facing the U.S.-based INGO sector is retaining and advancing diverse professional staff. During this assessment, staff with one or more underrepresented identities cited the lack of mentors, peer support, promotional opportunities, leadership training, and networks within the sector as challenges they had faced throughout their careers. Similar findings were reinforced by the **BRIDGE Report** in 2021, which found that although racial diversity is greater at the lower levels of organizations, at least 40% of organizations have a leadership team that is more than 80% white—including organization heads, leadership teams, and board members. According to a **Bond report**, over 65% of BIPOC professionals in the sector feel they lack equal access to mentors, 69%

say they are unable to take leadership on internal initiatives as much as their white peers, and 50% perceive a lack of access to the same training opportunities as their white peers.

In response to this sector-wide challenge, InterAction is developing a coalition-wide Leadership Fellowship Program to accelerate progress for emerging INGO leaders from underrepresented groups. The fellowship would connect mid-career professionals from underrepresented groups with CEOs and other sector leaders for mentoring, leadership training, peer-to-peer support, and networking. The aim is to diversify INGO leadership by identifying and building a pipeline and alumni cohort of diverse and qualified individuals across our alliance of organizations who are primed for senior leadership roles.

Recommendations

1. **Pay interns a living wage:** To ensure greater equity and diversity across the pipeline entering the sector, organizations should avoid offering unpaid internships.
2. **Reform recruitment and hiring practices:** Organizations should consciously and systematically track associated demographic data and take concrete steps to expand networks and sources for recruitment, reinforce DEI values in job descriptions, post salary range information, redact applications to reduce bias, represent diversity through interview panels, and reduce bias in interviews.
3. **Support retention of diverse staff:** Organizations should reinforce welcoming work environments through proper onboarding, continuous reinforcement of inclusive workplace culture (including through mentorship programs and employee resource groups, as appropriate), and equitable and transparent performance evaluation and compensation policies (including regular pay equity reviews).
4. **Support the launch and success of a leadership fellowship program for the sector:** Organizations should accelerate the advancement of emerging INGO leaders from underrepresented groups via sponsorship and programmatic collaboration.