CATALYZING CAREERS

Enablers of career transitions for national practitioners into international leadership roles

THE CANOPY LAB

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INCLUSION & LEADERSHIP SERIES   **Laura Kim, Holly Lard Krueger & Audrey Lodes**

INTRODUCTION

Among donor agencies and Implementing Partners (IPs), there is a widely perceived shortage of qualified senior leaders in Market Systems Development (MSD). This is despite more than a decade of investments dedicated to building capacity in the field of international development from both sides of the industry.

In the latest installment of the Canopy Lab's Inclusion and Leadership series, we set out, with generous support from Mercy Corps, to understand the structural barriers and biases influencing this phenomenon. Specifically, we asked the question, *"What are the key enablers which contribute to the career transition from 'national' to 'international' senior staff for MSD professionals?"* This focus emerged from the recognition that leadership requirements in MSD often extend beyond conventional criteria (which are already restrictive in themselves), necessitating a deeper understanding of the skills and experiences that facilitate successful[1] transitions.

Through this research, the Canopy Lab aims to uncover supportive mechanisms that can propel the advancement of qualified individuals, irrespective of their country of origin. Further, we aspire to equip IPs with actionable strategies on how to expand the overall pipeline of diverse senior MSD leaders. Lastly, we hope that the study findings will contribute to one of many conversations around how the development industry can address inequities, while recognizing the need to invest in deeper structural changes.

This study is designed as a first exploration of career transitions. We acknowledge the value of widening the scope to better understand how gender, identity, geography and culture influence career trajectories though that was not possible with the resources available for this study. This study is intended for stakeholders invested in talent development and diversity within the international development sector. We hope that the study findings stimulate further inquiry and catalyzes efforts to address these critical issues.

INCLUSION AND LEADERSHIP SERIES

The Canopy Lab's Inclusion and Leadership series seeks to uncover the biases, structures, relationships, and rules which influence who occupies leadership roles in international development. It is one way we contribute to thinking about and advancing DEI and localization efforts in international development.
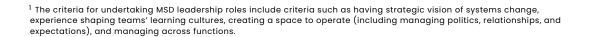
Over the course of our five-part (and counting) series, the Canopy Lab has delved into procurement, recruitment, promotion and retention practices of both implementing partners and donors, including USAID. The series has also examined the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on development professionals and their respective organizations, as well as explored the future of the industry in a post-pandemic world.

Beyond Downloads, Views, and 'Likes,' How Do You Know Your Research Is Having an Impact?

Shaping Our New Normal: An Unprecedented Opportunity to Reimagine a More Inclusive International

This study is the sixth in the Canopy Lab's Inclusion and Leadership series, which explores the structures and norms that influence who gets to advance in the international development sector. Over the course of our series, we have delved into procurement, recruitment, promotion and retention practices of both Implementing Partners and donors, including USAID. We have also examined the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on development professionals and their respective organizations, as well as explored the future of the industry in a post-pandemic world. Check out the complete collection of our studies on the Canopy Lab's website here.

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[1] The criteria for undertaking MSD leadership roles include criteria such as having strategic vision of systems change, experience shaping teams' learning cultures, creating a space to operate (including managing politics, relationships, and expectations), and managing across functions.

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METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

The study was conducted over two phases. We began with a preliminary literature review phase to deepen our understanding of the existing knowledge around career progression and to establish the language and framing of our study. In the second phase, we conducted individual interviews with 19 professionals who had firsthand experience transitioning from national roles to international roles within MSD. Employing a semi-structured interview guide, we delved into understanding these professionals' experiences, including the challenges they faced and the catalysts they believed were critical in propelling their careers into international leadership roles.

While our respondents represented diverse identities, geographies and cultures, our sample size was too limited to draw conclusions based on these variables. We notably could not apply a gender lens, as international women MSD leaders only comprised 5 of the 19 respondents. This was not due to lack of effort in identifying them, but an indication of the pervasive gender gap in MSD leadership – as articulated in the Canopy Lab's underlined word. From the outset, we recognized that our sample would not be fully representative, but nonetheless we felt it would yield substantive insights and spark meaningful conversations as well as potentially catalyze further research into the nuances of these transitions.

Throughout our study, we sought the expertise and insights of an Advisory Council, comprising 35 gender and geographically diverse senior leaders, practitioners, program managers and human resource professionals from large and small-sized IPs and freelance consultants. The council contributed to refining our scope, shaping our methodology, suggesting interviewees, and providing feedback on our preliminary findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

We started our analysis by acknowledging the underlying biases and structural constraints of our industry first as they are directly related to the career catalysts. We used a systems lens to understand key obstacles faced by national practitioners in advancing to international leadership roles. We then present our findings on career catalysts.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

There are several structural constraints which influence the career mobility of national staff. The most recognizable is the fact that a person's passport will impact which countries they are eligible to work in as well as their broader movement within the industry. This gives a distinct advantage to development professionals from high-income countries. Even though geopolitical nuances and diplomatic relations can pose significant barriers, some respondents highlighted that they can also be used as a convenient excuse by organizations to avoid investing in the growth of their national staff:

> *"For my country specifically, it's also the passport we hold. It's beyond what the organization can do and beyond what the donor can do. […] Organizations don't want to get into all of it for us. So, they don't and they just tell you it's impossible and that's it. So, they don't try to go the extra mile on that protocol."*

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Related to the constraints imposed by one's passport is that fact that the orientation and networks of national staff tend to be local. This means that it can be more challenging to identify and seize professional development and visibility raising opportunities like training and participating in conferences outside of one's country.

This contrasts with a development professional who begins their career as an international practitioner. By nature of their international position (and passport), they are more likely to be plugged into broader networks, scanning for opportunities across a much larger playing field, and able to participate in international meetings and conferences.

Another structural issue is the tiered classification between international and national staff and associated charge out rates. Regardless of whether the IP is for-profit or not, the margin applied to staff positions is a major consideration when deciding on who to propose for leadership positions. This is another area where international staff have an advantage as the margin tends to be higher. This highlights the reality that international development is a business at the end of the day; and economic considerations factor significantly in hiring decisions.

⚖️ UNCONSCIOUS BIAS AND MENTAL MODELS

In addition to structural constraints, the industry is rife with unconscious biases and mental models that impede the upward career mobility of national practitioners and contribute to inequities within the international development sector. International practitioner expertise is valued higher and paid more than the expertise national practitioners. Respondents noted that national practitioners receive continuous messaging that international practitioners inherently possess superior expertise, and their expertise was less valued. These biases extend further to shape perceptions of leadership suitability, often favoring international – predominantly Western – professionals. Anecdotes shared by respondents highlight how these biases persist and impede the recognition of local expertise:

> *"The usual assumption is that when [international experts] come to your country, the local staff do not matter. They probably need to talk to the COP because that's the expatriate guy [...] we have gotten used to that... we deserve to have the same respect. We don't need to keep reminding people where we've been [or what we know] for them to show respect."*

Another respondent noted these biases manifested in the hiring selection of an international, Western candidate over a more qualified national practitioner, based on the assumption that the former could build better rapport with donors. They noted how these unspoken mental models made it challenging to address and challenge such biases:

> *"The threshold for hiring is so low for somebody from the US or from the UK, as compared to somebody from Africa. These barriers do not allow us to grow, even when we bring more to the table. There was an instance where I was asked to hire a deputy team leader, who was a pig farmer in the UK. And I [couldn't hire] a local person who had five years of experience working under me, simply because that job needed to be held by somebody who could do 'relationship building' with the donor. Do you understand those little nuances? And you know, these things are not written down anywhere. You can't challenge people on it."*

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Further, respondents observed that donors often overlook or fail to question such decisions by organizations, thereby perpetuating the status quo: *"I would say one of the most impactful programs, at least in [my country of origin], which is being renewed for a new term, has no local person in senior leadership or in middle level management. Not in M&E. Not in operations. And the donor isn't saying "Hey something is wrong here."*

Messaging matters. Given both the implicit and explicit messaging around their capabilities, national practitioners may be more cautious in seeking international positions. Even for those who do apply, rejection based on perceived inadequacy is common. As one respondent poignantly described, such experiences can be deeply disheartening, especially when juxtaposed with the relative ease with which Western practitioners ascend to leadership roles:

> *"Sometimes you will apply and you will not be shortlisted. And if you are not shortlisted, they will send you a generic email that says the caliber of the other applicants were far better, which is quite discouraging. So then you will say 'Oh, okay, I am not in the caliber of the people that are required for this position.' And you will find yourself shying back, not even applying eventually… and then you'll see someone coming from say, HQ with a different [Western] passport, let's say an intern to work with you in the field, and then not even a year later, he or she is back as your boss, your supervisor and all that. And you check their profile, and they've just graduated from school two years ago and you graduated from school 10 years ago. You've got a lot more experience and then you are wondering, 'Why not me?' and things like that. But as national staff get shy and we then say, 'Okay, it's because we are not qualified.' Especially since you got feedback emails that said that the caliber of these other applicants were better."*

These biases and structural barriers result in several specific disadvantages for national practitioners, including less exposure to opportunities and lower visibility within the sector – making it challenging for national practitioners to advance their careers, and thereby perpetuating the status quo.

Our research focused on catalysts within the control of an IP. However, we found the following factors, outside of the control of an IP and often the control or means of an individual, also contributed to the career transition of national staff. The first two factors were found to lend additional credibility to a national practitioners expertise (and counter the bias), whereas the third factor lowered the barriers to entry into an international leadership role:

- **Participation in a flagship program.** Working on a high profile, successful program (e.g. Katalyst, MDF, etc.) gave national practiners an advantage. "There used to be a time when Katalyst was the most popular MSD program. […] It was seen as the gold standard at that time, so that really helped. […]If you've ever worked for some of those successful programs, it gives you a platform for you to get noticed. [In addition to your experience], working for a particular program is very helpful giving you leverage to make that transition."

- **Tertiary degrees from reputable western intitutions.** These degrees enjoy global recognition and confer a sense of credibility upon individuals. They can bolster professional reputations, and often those with Western education are believed to have cross-cultural competencies. *"My goal was to get an international degree because I knew that if I get an international degree, I can apply for international jobs."*

- **Opportunities in Fragile and Conflict Affected States.** In these contexts, traditional norms around hiring are more fluid, lowering the traditional requirements for local practitioners to step into international roles and opportunities. "I met a lot of fellow nationals who started their first assignment in fragile countries, like Afghanistan or Yemen. In my case, it definitely helped me and many other colleagues."

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CAREER CATALYSTS

Despite the obstacles encountered, our respondent pool successfully transitioned into international leadership roles – a testament to their individual talents, dedication and ability to overcome structural barriers which blocked others. While their personal attributes played a pivotal role in their career advancements, we sought to uncover the organizational factors that bolstered their success and identified five major catalysts:

Mentoring & Coaching: Mentoring is a relationship, usually long-term, where a mentor offers advice about the values, norms, and systems of a particular field or organization. Coaching, on the other hand, is a more structured, goal-oriented process where a coach helps an individual develop specific skills or improve performance in a particular area.

Short-term Assignments: Also known as temporary duty (TDYs) travel, international short-term assignments are those that take place in a country outside of one's own. These assignments, while technically international, occur while the professional is still on a national contract, and thus are not officially (or contractually) considered international assignments.

Sponsorship: This is a relationship where a senior leader or influential individual within an organization actively advocates for an individual's career advancement. Sponsors use their influence and decision-making power to help the individuals pursue and obtain opportunities.

Training: Formal professional development courses. They can focus on hard, technical skills (e.g. MSD) or they can focus on soft skills (e.g. leadership skills, management, communications, etc.) They tend to be short-term and can span from days to several weeks.

Visibility: when an organization deliberately builds a professional's profile. While an individual can always build their own brand, we focus on how organizations facilitate this process. Visibility likely leads to sponsorship

It's important to note that not all respondents credited their transition to all five catalysts. Rather, each individual's journey was shaped by a unique configuration of these factors. That being said, nearly all respondents, with the exception of one, noted the necessity of more than one catalyst to transition to international roles. Moreover, the greater prevalence of a particular catalyst does not necessarily signify its greater importance. For instance, 89% of our respondents mentioned training as a catalyst – as compared to 47% for short-term international assignments. However, this should not imply that training is a more important catalyst than short-term international assignments. In fact, one could argue that training is simply more accessible than short-term assignments, thus influencing its higher prevalence among respondents. One respondent, as an example, noted how while training was important to acquire fundamental knowledge of MSD, it was short-term assignments that boosted their confidence in taking on international roles.

Overall, the identified catalysts represent straightforward elements commonly associated with career development and advancement in most professional settings. However, it is important to acknowledge that our respondents predominantly experienced these catalysts in informal ways, with the exception of training. This informality raises concerns about equitable access for all individuals within organizations. Informal pathways can inadvertently perpetuate biases against disadvantaged, underrepresented subgroups, such as women or ethnic minorities.

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CAREER CATALYSTS: DEEP DIVE

The following section presents the five catalysts in more detail. It's important to note that the order of presentation does not imply any hierarchy or relative importance among these catalysts; each catalyst plays a unique and valuable role in career transitions.

MENTORING AND COACHING

Both mentoring and coaching played integral roles in fostering professional development. Mentoring entailed a long-term relationship wherein seasoned mentors imparted invaluable insights into the values, norms, and intricacies of a particular field or organization.

Respondents highlighted the significance of mentorship in their career progression, emphasizing the accessibility and supportiveness of their mentors. For instance, one reflected on the how their leadership team was invested in his growth, not only offering technical advice but also guidance navigating personal and professional dilemmas:

> *"I worked under very strong but also very smart leadership. They were very interested in seeing team development. They had open conversations with me about what I wanted to build and provided feedback on whether I'm on the right track. They gave constructive feedback, both in terms of the technical areas, but also in terms of the day-to-day social elements, like how do you grapple with personal life choices and all that in your career pathways…They are very close to me and I built my friendship with those leaders. They made it very easy for me to communicate with them about what I want, and how do I get there. These are people with over 20 years of experience. I was very young in this field, I needed to really be very close to some people. That was a very key factor for me."*

Other respondents appreciated the structured nature of coaching, which offered opportunities for reflection, goal setting, and skill refinement. One respondent noted how it was instrumental in building confidence and honing specific skills necessary for success: *"The most important thing was that they were very open for me to have coaching sessions. They were voluntarily done by the team leader, but then I continued to have them and I also had a professional coach. […] The one that I personally found the most beneficial because it helped me with my confidence to go and try to do the next thing was the coaching."*

SHORT-TERM ASSIGNMENTS

Also known as temporary duty travel (TDYs), international short-term assignments were integral to the professional development of national practitioners, providing them with invaluable exposure to diverse contexts and experiences. It is important to point out that these assignments often occurred while the professional remained under national contracts, and thus did not officially qualify as international assignments. Despite this technical distinction, the impact of these experiences on professional growth cannot be overstated.

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For some respondents, these short-term assignments served as a pivotal moment for realizing their potential on the international stage. On respondent reflected on the transformative effect of undertaking TDYs on behalf of his employer:

> *"If you are not able to build the self-confidence to think 'I'm good enough to be international', you'll never get feedback that you need from the teams above you, from the people that you look up to, to say that you are ready. You will look at opportunities at the expat level, and you will never try [for them]. You just think you're best fit for a national level position.*
>
> *If I was not called to take up a role to do an assessment in [another country] and never had interactions with expats there who said, 'Oh you are ready [to be international], why are you delaying?' - I think I could have remained until today as a national staff. I would not have applied to be an international in [this country] and [that country]. I think many nationals could be quite ready to pick up a role at the expat level. But they do not know the demand for that market, they do not know whether they qualify for that. When I picked up the role in [another country] and went, I started speaking to the team I was supervising. And I told them, 'You know what? I've interacted with multiple expats in the market systems sector. They're not better than you.' And now, at least for my team, two people are expats now."*

In addition to providing international exposure, some organizations provided the space for their national staff to take on external opportunities:

> *"I was given a lot of exposure as a trainer by [my employer]. I organized several trainings for across [multiple countries in the region for them]. So, first thing, you know, one needs to have a bit of confidence that you can [go international], right? And while doing these assignments for over a year, I gained that confidence that I can certainly contribute even as an international full-time staff […] With my previous employer, my ambitions were within the country… but then [this employer] played a big role in giving me that sense of confidence, but also exposure and opportunity. Even while I was still working with them, they gave me the permission to go [take on another assignment for an external organization]. So, that was exceptional."*

SPONSORSHIP

Sponsorship entailed having a senior leader or influential figure within an organization actively advocate for an individual's career advancement. Sponsors utilized their sway and decision-making authority to champion individuals, enabling them to seize and excel in various opportunities.

In our study, we saw sponsorship being featured in two contexts. The first occurred during the external hiring process. One respondent shared their experience during an interview process for an international position, where a prior professional relationship swiftly propelled them through the hiring process:

> *"I was being interviewed for a role and I'd gone through two or three interviews… Then, there was somebody that I had already worked with for a long time. And the moment he saw me during the interview, he said, 'Oh, you guys didn't tell me, I'm talking to [name of respondent]. I would have told you there is no need [for an interview], that you should go ahead with the contracting.' And that was the end of the interview [process]."*

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In the second context, we observed how sponsorship plays a crucial role in facilitating international transitions within an organization. One respondent detailed their proactive approach in seeking sponsorship internally: *"When I saw the position for the job I have now, I felt I didn't fill all the requirements. But I talked to a project director who said, 'What do you mean? Of course you fill the requirements. You do all of this. This is this is exactly what you do everyday.' […] I had the advantage of being from the organization. I requested a call with the country director, to understand a bit more nature of the job from him before I decided to apply."* In both scenarios, whether securing a new position or transitioning internally, the backing and advocacy of leadership figures shaped an individual's career trajectory.

TRAININGS

Training programs played a vital role in the professional development of national practitioners, offering both technical expertise and soft skills essential for career advancement. These courses, spanning a spectrum of topics from market systems development to leadership and communication, provided intensive learning experiences that shaped the trajectory of practitioners' careers.

Respondents noted how technical training programs were instrumental in equipping them with the specialized knowledge and skills required for their roles. For instance, participation in programs like the Springfield Center enabled practitioners to interact with senior professionals in the MSD space, instilling confidence in their abilities and validating their expertise: *"I had chance to join and participate in the Springfield Center. And I interacted with many participants from other development programs and interacted with them quite well. And I did quite well in that training. I was quite junior, quite young, and there were very senior people in their training. So that gave me confidence that what I know, and what I have learned, has some value."*

Another respondent highlighted how organizations' investments in language immersion programs, for English, demonstrated a commitment to empowering practitioners to engage effectively in international settings: *"The level of English for many people [in my country] is a limitation also […] There are many people that simply can't go abroad because they don't have good English. I learned English when I started with an organization that worked with USAID, and they sent me to DC for immersion […] It was paid for by the organization, and it was by request, it was not easy, and it was an exception. This was really exceptional that an organization did this with their funds."*

In addition to technical proficiency, some respondents emphasized the importance of soft skills training in preparing them for leadership roles. Several respondents highlighted programs that developed their emotional intelligence and facilitation skills – equipping them with the tools to lead MSD programs:

"I participated in [an emerging] leadership program, which is really focused on emotional intelligence: how do you become a good leader and all that? I think those were very helpful for me as I was getting more into managerial roles, having so many teams to manage. You may be very strong analytically, but if you do not work with people, especially in the field of MSD where most times you have to play an advisory role and technical guiding role... I also participated in a program management facilitator role where they train facilitation skills. Like, can you pass the knowledge in ways that those who are in the field can see and be able to learn and use those manuals and guidelines and tools around program management?"

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VISIBILITY

Organizations played a pivotal role in cultivating a national practitioner's profile. While individuals could certainly work on crafting their own personal brand, our focus here was on how organizations facilitated this process. Enhanced visibility often served as a precursor to sponsorship, opening doors for career advancement.

In some cases, organizations strategically positioned practitioners to gain recognition and exposure on a global scale. This external-facing visibility showcased their expertise and contributions but also positioned them for opportunities. As one respondent noted, *"A real catalyst in my transition, the things that stood out for me, are the many international trips and trainings that [my employer] offered me while I was with them. They took me to about three international conferences – where I not only learned but I also did presentations. They also took me to a number of international trainings… those are the things that I feel really gave my CV visibility with [my transition to an international position]."*

In other contexts, organizations orchestrated mechanisms to elevate an individual's visibility internally. One practitioner stated: "[My employer] created different platforms, webinars, etc., where I was invited to share in those spaces. I feel the structure made it even easier for me to sort of share that expertise and grow within the agency." Another respondent attributed their career progression to their project director, who encouraged them to take a lead role in meetings and engagements with senior management:

> *"I would give credit to my project director who basically would push me to talk instead of him so when there were meetings to explain what happened in the project [to headquarters], he would always give me that room so that I would be the one to talk directly to the CEO or to the head of international programs. When you visit a lot, then you start to meet other people, they see you as a familiar face in the office, so they would get to know you. Because of these relationships I felt like I was in a stronger position to apply for the job I have now."*

Finally, some organizations ensured professionals were prominently visible to key audiences, such as donors. As one respondent noted, this tailored visibility was instrumental in instilling a sense of confidence: "[*My COP*] *would take me to any meeting, you know, whether it's with the Mission Director also, with the ambassador, or someone from Washington, DC. He would literally take me to those meetings, and be like, 'You've got to speak. This is your space. Speak.'* "

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EXPERIENCES AS INTERNATIONALS

OVERCOMING INITIAL BIAS FROM LOCAL TEAMS

Our respondents quickly realized that obtaining the status of an international practitioner does not automatically guarantee better treatment, especially when compared to counterparts from Western backgrounds. They continued to encounter biases and lowered expectations stemming from entrenched mental models. As one respondent shared, navigating this landscape was far from smooth: *"Being an international staff, from either a minority or the least developed country… when I started I wouldn't say it was smooth. You still feel like people want you to prove yourself, you know? You get a feeling that there's expectation that you have to excessively prove yourself for the role that you're doing. And I didn't know if, it was only just about me? Is it because of where I come from, etc.? But there was sort of that feeling for me if I'm just being honest. It was just based on what you'd see someone say or how someone treats what you say versus someone else, things like that."*

Yet, rather than succumbing to these obstacles, respondents saw an opportunity to challenge and reshape perceptions, taking on this extra effort that was not required for their colleagues from Western backgrounds.. They adopted a stance of humility and openness, positioning themselves as eager learners within their teams. A respondent articulated this mindset, saying: *"I know something about market systems, but when I go to a new country, I always try to keep myself as open as possible to understand, 'How do things work here? I know, in my country, things work like this. But that doesn't mean they will work here. What are the incentives? Why are things working like this? So for me, investing in understanding the culture of a country is the biggest investment that I need to make. Because if you don't do that, you cannot earn the respect of the team. And if you cannot earn respect from the team, chances are your project won't be successful. So I think that was one of the biggest learnings I had."*

Their actions challenged stereotypes and emphasized that successful leadership is grounded in understanding and respecting cultural nuances, challenging biased notions of who can be a leader.

INCLUSION BEGETS MORE INCLUSION

As national practitioners transitioned to international roles, many brought with them a deep commitment to advancing inclusivity and diversity within their organizations and projects. Their experiences and perspectives uniquely positioned them to champion these efforts, often leading to tangible changes within their teams and beyond.

For instance, one respondent highlighted how they proactively sent their national gender and inclusion advisor to a conference in the United States to present groundbreaking research. The advisor's visibility at the conference resulted in a regional job offer. Another respondent expressed a deep sense of responsibility in nurturing the growth of others. They reflected on the satisfaction derived from witnessing former colleagues, whom they had mentored, flourish in international roles around the world:

> *"I've tried to play my part in building capacities of people to become better at what they do. If I look back, one of the joys that I can talk about is that there are about five or six people who have worked under me, who are now working in different parts of the world. And I don't think the credit is me, I think the credit belongs to them. But it does bring me some enjoyment that I may have played a certain part in them becoming better at what they do. So my leadership has always been about letting people grow, letting people do what they want to do bit more getting, giving them the exposure. I've noticed that many times, many other leaders or managers don't find that to be too comfortable. I see things differently."*

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Another respondent articulated how they, now as team leader, wanted to embody an inclusive mindset. They expressed a commitment to actively seek out female candidates for leadership positions, recognizing the potential they brought to the table around inclusion.

> *"My M&E person has left. I am now inclined to be more deliberate in looking for more female candidates. So I think the intentions are shifting over time. But we still need more efforts.. […] I see within my own team, the men are very outspoken but when I see the females, I see very strong talent among them but I need to help them discover that and let them be able to grow. So yeah, I think there's quite a very clear dynamics within this space."*

TAKEAWAYS

Catalysts are instrumental in addressing systemic inequalities in international development. They have the power to counter barriers and create pathways for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to access leadership opportunities. However, much of this vital work relies on goodwill and is often undertaken voluntarily by individuals or groups within organizations. While training opportunities are often institutionalized, the other four catalysts – sponsorship, visibility, short-term international assignments, and coaching & mentoring – are often ad-hoc or informal. This reliance on goodwill underscores the need for more structured support to ensure that transitions to international leadership roles benefit from systematic and sustainable initiatives.

We advocate for organizations to be more deliberate in integrating these catalysts into their pipeline development plans. Of course, this is easier said than done – and requires dedicated resources and a willingness to acknowledge and address biases. At the same time, failing to institutionalize and accelerate these efforts poses a greater risk. As some respondents noted, there is risk of losing valuable talent, especially in specialized areas like MSD. Even if individuals remain within the organization, the investment in specific MSD skills can be lost over time due to lack of continued reinforcement:

> *"Part of it is our own mistake, right? We invest in establishing the space of MSD and if that program closes, instead of supporting this staff to build further their MSD programming mind, we send them to another conventional program […] I've known people went to Springfield. I've known people done MSD programs five years ago, but now, if you start engaging them on an MSD way of thinking, they can't because they lost it. The conventional programming is easy. And it's very easy for people to back flight into life and find comfort to implement it that way.*

To mitigate these risks, initiatives to facilitate career transitions should be prioritized and integrated into project strategies from the outset. One respondent noted that this conscious approach needs to happen early on, with management driving conversations with HR and senior leadership to emphasize the importance of retention and development for both individuals and the organization as a whole:

> *"I think these kinds of [career transition] initiatives have to be accelerated more. And they have to consciously be part of the HR strategy, right, from the time that the project has started up. And if it is something that you do as a crisis management or a knee jerk management, when the project is coming to an end, it might be too late. One is the talent may just jump ship, and I don't blame them for a minute for doing that. The second is that they stay on when with the project, like many of us did, but then it's too late, I mean, to really find an opportunity for them."*

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It is important to note that our study is not prescribing a specific sequence, magnitude, or configuration of catalysts. Realistically, we anticipate that the process may unfold gradually, with organizations adapting based on their unique contexts and priorities. What matters most is the intentionality behind these leadership pipeline development efforts. By establishing clear commitments and frameworks, IPs can ensure that catalysts – in the forms of their choosing – are integrated into their pipeline development in a sustainable manner.

> *"So the one thing is the organizations themselves should be having very open-mindedness towards the diversity, inclusion, and equity. And that can happen by giving opportunities, and they don't have to be necessarily be the full time job immediately, right? Initially, a lot of exposure visits can happen, right? They can give short term consultancy opportunities or mentoring support. And then once people have that sort of confidence and also competence, then perhaps offer them the jobs. Of course, these will be on a competitive basis. But still, you have to give ambition to people that they can move up."*

Overall, our study has shed light on the challenges and opportunities surrounding the career transition from national to international senior roles in MSD. By embracing catalysts such as sponsorship, visibility, short-term international assignments, and coaching/mentoring, organizations can create more equitable pathways for individuals from underrepresented backgrounds to access leadership opportunities. However, this transformation is not the responsibility of IPs alone. Donors play a large role in promoting these catalysts through their messaging and support. From integrating catalysts into pipeline development plans to fostering a culture of continuous learning and growth, there is a collective responsibility to ensure that talent is recognized, nurtured, and empowered – wherever individuals may reside.

The Canopy Lab is a US registered small business specialized in the practical application of systems thinking. We help teams think deeper and work smarter to solve complex problems.

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