

GUIDANCE NOTE: CREATING AND SUSTAINING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE TEAMS

OCTOBER 2021

Partnership-based research by Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) is helping to drive recognition that diversity and inclusion make a difference to the performance of humanitarian organisations.¹ However, for meaningful change to address inequalities, our approach to diversity and inclusion must channel these concepts and values into strategies and actions that are intentionally practised within teams, organisations and the sector as a whole.

This guidance note is intended to support humanitarian organisations to develop proactive and consistent measures to act on their commitments to diversity and inclusion. It identifies three domains of practice for improving diversity and inclusion, each with strategic priorities and concrete steps to help achieve change in day-to-day operations. The note also features practice spotlights to share learning from humanitarian organisations that partnered with HAG in the research.



¹ Humanitarian Advisory Group's Diverse Leadership reports include [Drawing on our Diversity: Humanitarian leadership](#), [Data on diversity: humanitarian leadership under the spotlight](#), and [How diverse leadership shaped responses to COVID-19 within the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement](#).

This paper is part of Humanitarian Advisory Group's *Diverse Leadership* research project.



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WHO SHOULD USE THIS RESOURCE?

This note is a resource for humanitarian leadership teams at program, organisation and system levels. It can be used to recognise and prioritise entry points to build diverse and inclusive teams, as well as identify the actions, resources and structures needed. Leaders should consider the specific culture of their organisation when using this guide, recognising that any interventions need to be tailored to the organisation, its staff and the context.

The guidance is based on research and learning within and outside the humanitarian sector, including HAG's research stream exploring [diverse and inclusive humanitarian leadership](#). Further resources are listed at the end of each section.

DEFINITIONS

Diversity is all the ways we differ.² It includes differences according to gender, age, disability, cultural background, sexual orientation, social and economic background, profession, education, work experiences and organisational role.³

Inclusion occurs when people throughout a diverse group feel valued and respected, have equal and equitable access to opportunities and resources, and can contribute their perspectives and talents to improve their organisation.⁴ Both diversity and inclusion are needed to generate organisational success in the humanitarian sector.⁵

2 Information Management Victoria, *The Emergency Management Diversity and Inclusion Framework*, 2017.

3 Adapted from Diversity Council Australia, *Diversity and inclusion*, 2018. <https://www.dca.org.au/di-planning/getting-started-di/diversityinclusion-explained>

4 Jane O'Leary, Graeme Russel and Jo Tilly, *Building inclusion: an evidence based model of inclusive leadership*, Diversity Council Australia, 2015. https://www.dca.org.au/sites/default/files/dca_inclusive_leadership_synopsis_accessible.pdf

5 Caroline Harper Jantuah, Daphne Moench and Sarah Bond, Using diversity and inclusion as source for humanitarian innovation, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, September 21, 2019; see also Featherstone, A., Fit for the future: strengthening the leadership pillar of humanitarian reform, The NGOs and Humanitarian Reform Project, 2010. <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/fit-for-the-future-strengthening-the-leadership-pillar-of-humanitarian-reform.pdf>



UNDERSTAND AND EMBED

Determine the current state of play in relation to diversity and inclusion

Building an evidence base can help teams make informed decisions to promote diversity and inclusion, identify obstacles and opportunities, and assess change later on.⁶ It is important to honestly assess what is happening in target areas (such as recruitment, staff engagement, pay scales, and promotion). Creating safe spaces for collective discussion and analysis is key, because staff perspectives can help to determine which areas are priorities, can bring greatest value, or are most readily achievable while momentum builds.

- ✓ Examine the composition of the teams across levels, positions and departments to determine the current dynamics and ways to focus diversity and inclusion initiatives. This can be repeated periodically or before making important structural changes.
- ✓ Understand how staff members across departments and levels perceive the organisation's culture in relation to diversity and inclusion. Staff surveys should be sensitive to the range of ways that inequalities may present within the organisation.
- ✓ Consult staff members to identify barriers that prevent marginalised identities from feeling welcome and that they belong. Barriers include attitudes, perceptions, thoughts and misconceptions that staff members may hold toward certain groups of people. Physical barriers include infrastructure, for example, that impedes access for persons with disability. Institutional barriers include the lack of policies and procedures that ensure equitable access and participation.
- ✓ Review past diversity and inclusion efforts and identify key lessons and any missed opportunities.

Integrate diversity and inclusion into organisational strategies, objectives, and plans

Best practice review shows that diversity and inclusion initiatives work best when integrated within organisational plans and objectives, guided by clear goals and championed by leadership.⁷ This allows diversity and inclusion initiatives to be sustained and at the same time positions diversity and inclusion as integral to the achievement of organisational objectives and operational decisions.

- ✓ Ensure that key documents articulate how the commitment to diversity and inclusion in the workplace connects to the organisation's core values and objectives.
- ✓ Communicate the diversity and inclusion commitment to all staff, with emphasis on why it is important and what it means to the organisation.
- ✓ Include diversity and inclusion as part of the organisation's annual performance/ progress review, using measurable indicators.
- ✓ Identify a senior-level champion who can be tasked with giving visible support and can provide strategic guidance.
- ✓ Actively engage managers by seeking their ideas and input on ways to integrate diversity and inclusion values and initiatives in strategies, action plans and policies.
- ✓ Ensure that internal budgets allocate financial and human resources to drive diversity and inclusion objectives. This may include resources for training, awareness events, and mentorship and professional development programs (see pages 10-11).

⁶ Elizabeth Hirsh and Donald Tomaskovic-Devey, Metrics accountability, and transparency: a simple recipe to increase diversity and reduce bias, in *What works? Evidence-based ideas to increase diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace*, Center for Employment Equity, no date, pp. 16-23.

⁷ Neharika Vohra and Vijayalakshmi Chari, Inclusive workplaces: Lessons from theory and practices, *Vikalpa: The Journal for Decision Makers*, 2015, vol. 40, no. 3.



ACHIEVING EFFECTIVE POLICYMAKING

Research has shown that establishing policy can spread responsibility for promoting diversity and inclusion beyond individual leaders and promote institutional knowledge and memory.⁸ However, policies are only effective when they are understood and respected.

- ✓ Write the policy in plain and positive language with examples, concrete definitions, and in formats that are accessible for individuals with disability.
- ✓ Show how the policy objectives align with the organisation's mission, vision, or goal.
- ✓ Seek staff feedback on draft policies and be transparent about how the draft was revised based on their inputs.
- ✓ Strive to ensure all relevant staff know about the policy and understand how to act on it.

Set up systems for review and accountability

To identify and sustain progress, it is essential to have a structured system for review. The approach and timing may vary, but any system should be precise about when a review is most helpful, who should participate, and what action is required based on the learning. Evidence has shown that having systems in place to review progress on inclusion and diversity not only maintains leadership accountability, but promotes collective responsibility for change.⁹

- ✓ Encourage staff feedback and anonymous reporting of any instances when diversity and inclusion principles are threatened or action is compromised.
- ✓ Assess the impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives on employee perceptions and experiences. This will require establishing ways to assess change and impact and using them consistently over time. Keep in mind the different groups whose views you need to understand – you will mostly likely need their advice on approaches to measurement.
- ✓ Communicate the assessment results to staff and outline the ways management intends to make concrete changes, including the timeframe.
- ✓ Build a culture of active respect. Giving staff the knowledge and confidence to react if they witness an instance of discrimination can turn bystanders into allies. This goes beyond institutional reporting mechanisms, although encouraging the use of those channels is also essential.

⁸ Scott Nicholson and Cheryl Sullivan-Colgazier, *Model policies and considerations for a diverse, equitable, inclusive and respectful work environment*, Office of Financial Management, 2020.

⁹ US Department of Commerce and Vice President Al Gore's National Partnership for Reinventing Government, *Best practices in achieving workforce diversity: Benchmarking study*, 1999.



Practice spotlight

Some organisations studied during HAG's Diverse Leadership project had undertaken assessments to understand how their programming and organisational processes could be more inclusive. For example, a national organisation affiliated with an international movement in the Philippines hired an independent, external consultant to conduct a gender audit, which was intended to assess the organisation's implementation of the gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) framework. Consultations with staff revealed that the audit promoted awareness of the importance of diversity and inclusion, both as part of the workplace and in project design and implementation practices.

In Bangladesh, staff of a local humanitarian organisation reflected that the recent focus on recruiting women and supporting them to shift into leadership positions could be attributed to their Gender Policy's role in improving the perception of women in the workplace, and in leadership.

In both cases, these initiatives created opportunities for the organisations to think through how diversity and inclusion could be better promoted in other aspects of their work such as programming, business support processes, hiring, and leadership composition.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ACFID, [Guidance for the development of a disability inclusion policy](#), 2021.

IASC, [A selection of promising practices on organizational culture change](#), May 2021.

ILO, [Eliminating discrimination against indigenous and tribal peoples in employment and occupation](#), 2007.

Office of Financial Management, [Model policies and considerations for a diverse, equitable, inclusive and respectful work environment](#), 2020.

Rainbow Health Victoria and La Trobe University, [The rainbow tick guide to LGBTI-inclusive practice](#), 2016.

UN Women, [Supplementary guidance on the enabling environment guidelines for the United Nations system in support of the Secretary-General's System-Wide Strategy on Gender Parity](#), 2019.



ENGAGE AND PROMOTE PARTICIPATION

Create varied spaces to capture diverse voices

Evidence demonstrates that when staff perceive they can safely share their opinions and experiences even when they diverge from those of leaders or others in the team, it boosts their morale, builds confidence to innovate and improves collaboration across teams.¹⁰ Inviting input in multiple forums and/or via several mechanisms recognises the value and needs of diverse communication styles. No matter the format, if confidentiality and anonymity have been promised, they must be fully respected by leaders and others.

- ✓ Develop a range of mechanisms for staff to communicate directly and regularly with the management. Some options are summarised below.
- ✓ Ensure that all staff have enough time to contribute to different forums or share input and feedback.
- ✓ Consult staff on the communication style or discussion formats with which they are most comfortable.

 <p>Field visits</p>	<p>The purpose of field visits is to get a better grasp of the experiences of staff in the field and the communities with which they work. The objectives of the field visit should be made clear to staff. Consider holding a meeting prior to every field visit so staff can explain the situation and manage expectations.</p>
 <p>Small group meetings</p>	<p>Small group meetings help staff feel comfortable in sharing their reflections and allow their perspectives to be heard more easily. They might also reveal whether certain meeting practices or formats (e.g. bilateral meetings, big group meetings) are better suited to some teams than others.</p>
 <p>Deep listening sessions</p>	<p>These sessions allow staff to share their own knowledge and deep stories in a judgment-free environment. Leaders need to embrace a 'listen to learn' mindset, appreciating what staff are trying to say instead of pushing out information and focusing on their own thoughts and feelings.¹¹</p>
 <p>Feedback mechanisms</p>	<p>The existence of both formal and informal feedback mechanisms helps normalise feedback within an organisation. Acting on feedback is a must.</p>
 <p>Surveys</p>	<p>Surveys enable collection of data that can be analysed to reveal patterns and behaviours. Consider disaggregating survey data according to demographic or professional attributes (e.g. age, gender, contract type); this can offer insights on how groups view or are affected by organisational decisions or changes.¹²</p>

¹⁰ Juliet Bourke and Bernadette Dillon, The diversity and inclusion revolution: eight powerful truths, *Deloitte Review*, 2018, iss. 22, pp. 85-86.

¹¹ Deep listening approaches involve reflexivity and 'intellectual humility' – 'accepting that we could be incorrect at many levels, whether theoretical, factual, emotional, social, cultural, or political, and seeking out opportunities to change our mind.' See Natalie Koch, Deep listening: practicing intellectual humility in geographic fieldwork, *Geographical Review*, 2019, vol. 110, no. 1-2, pp. 52-64.

¹² Katie Wuller, Shannon Gilmartin and Caroline Simard, The mistake companies make when they use data to plan diversity efforts, *Harvard Business Review*, September 6, 2019.

Turn discussion chairs into inclusion champions

A proactive approach to facilitating participation can start to shift social norms and power dynamics. For meetings and other collective discussions, strong, inclusive, and self-aware chairing is essential: the way a meeting is managed or facilitated can mitigate the potential for certain actors to dominate discussions, providing an opportunity for others who might otherwise be left out or talked over. It is important to remember that this work does not start or stop with the meeting clock; to ensure inclusive spaces requires preparation, action and follow-up.¹³



Before meetings

- ◀ Before agendas are determined, engage with staff, especially those working at field level or in non-leadership positions, to gather their perspectives on areas for discussion.
- ◀ List agenda items as questions, not generic topics. Using questions can be more accessible and encourages preparation.
- ◀ Reach out to staff prior to the event regarding specific areas or items on which you would like them to be ready to share their views.
- ◀ Request feedback on the agenda (to make this more manageable, the chance to comment could rotate through teams or a changing selection of staff).
- ◀ Anticipate potential debates and disagreements and constructive ways to manage them. There are several ways to do this. One is to prepare by engaging the staff who you anticipate will have a strong stance on an issue and remind them of the value of different voices informing decisions. Another way is to emphasise to the group the outcomes that you are collectively working toward.



During meetings

- ⚙ When opening, set the tone and expectations of the event, including highlighting the value of different voices contributing to the forum and decision-making.
- ⚙ Be intentional about who is given first opportunity to ask a question or provide an opinion; facilitating early contributions from less dominant participants can help to encourage greater participation throughout.
- ⚙ Based on the preparation (including an understanding of who had been approached and for what kind of input), proactively give participants opportunities to engage. Invite participants to share their thoughts and make sure they are acknowledged.
- ⚙ Allow individuals to finish sharing their reflections when others in the team interrupt or inadvertently silence a discussion.
- ⚙ Encourage divergent thinking and promote judgement-free learning through questions and active listening. Active listening requires more listening than talking, asking open-ended questions, and showing genuine interest through verbal and non-verbal cues.

¹³ Kathryn Heath and Brenda F. Wensil, To build an inclusive culture, start with inclusive meetings, *Harvard Business Review*, September 6, 2019; Salwa Rahim-Diward, How inclusive is your leadership? *Harvard Business Review*, April 19, 2021.



After meetings

- Ask for feedback from multiple staff to better understand any bias which might be affecting meeting dynamics. There may be problematic or negative meeting behaviours going on that you don't see as clearly as others do.
- Close the loop with any follow-up discussed or promised during the meeting. This may be with participants who haven't engaged during the meeting but who will be affected by the decisions or conversations.
- Support inclusive and representative dialogue on key points'
- Distribute meeting minutes and ensure they adequately capture all opinions and ideas raised

Bring more people along when making decisions

Studies of humanitarian accountability to affected people (AAP) have shown that collecting feedback without translating it into change can erode trust and discourage participation.¹⁴ Similar dynamics can apply in the workplace, so being transparent about the results of discussions and consultations and clarifying how these inform decisions are key to closing the feedback loop between staff and management. Leaders need to ensure that the decision-making process is transparent and two-way, and be mindful of how decisions affect people differently.

- ✓ Communicate the results of consultation and staff feedback. This will help staff members understand the range of views within their organisation, which may also encourage more self-awareness and reflection.
- ✓ Be transparent about how the information gathered will be processed and used in a timely manner. This can also mean proactively communicating why some feedback was not acted upon.
- ✓ Reflect on which types of feedback are addressed and which are not. Are there biases affecting how leaders view or use input?
- ✓ Understand the impact of decisions on different individuals. This circles back to the importance of equitable representation in decision-making spaces to ensure that diverse needs and strengths are recognised.



Practice spotlight

Our partner organisations have shared initiatives they have taken to improve the power dynamics within their teams, thereby promoting inclusive decision-making and staff engagement. In one organisation, the senior management team recognised that they needed to become more intentional in creating space for staff to come together and discuss ideas, leading them to restructure meetings to include all staff. As well as promoting staff representation in planning and decision-making, opening up some senior management team meetings helped to challenge silos within the organisation.

A local organisation introduced initiatives to empower more staff in decision-making platforms. One was a leaders' table to involve 'second-liners' in major decisions of the organisation; another was electing a staff representative to the organisation's board of trustees – an approach that aims to help the board be aware of and responsive to the everyday concerns of staff.

Anonymous surveys have helped capture information about important but sensitive issues, such as staff mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Leaders in one humanitarian organisation reflected that without creating this forum they would not have been able to recognise the struggles of their staff and provide appropriate support, given that most of their interactions are done online and remotely.

In both cases, these initiatives created opportunities for the organisations to think through how diversity and inclusion could be better promoted in other aspects of their work such as programming, business support processes, hiring, and leadership composition.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Deloitte, [Empowering professionals to work differently: virtual meeting guide](#), 2020.

Disability Inclusion Network, [Tips and tricks for inclusive virtual meeting](#), December 2020.

International Labour Organization, [Safe and healthy working environments free from violence and harassment](#), 2020.

UNESCAP, [Disability inclusive meetings: an operational guide](#), 2016.

Women Empowerment Principles, [Building inclusive boards to achieve gender equality](#), 2020.



CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

Improve recruitment pools and processes to bring in more diverse talent

While many organisations now include statements about their commitment to diversity and inclusion in job advertisements, this is a domain in which the principle of 'show, don't tell' applies. Instead of simply telling potential applicants of your commitment, show them how you put it into practice by presenting opportunities that aren't just for insiders, by making your processes easy to understand and accessible, and by proactively addressing potential biases.

- ✓ Check the role specifications for unnecessary hurdles that may create discriminatory barriers. For instance, what level of educational attainment does the role really require?
- ✓ Get the ad out beyond the usual places. Some ways to actively seek profiles that are not represented within the organisation include reaching out to sectors or networks that cater to under-represented groups and broadening your search outside cities or elite institutions. To meet the needs of diverse audiences, the role and employer must be described without insider language or professional jargon.
- ✓ Ensure the application, assessment, and interview processes are accessible to all candidates. This may include offering flexible assessment times and locations. Ask candidates if they require any support to participate.
- ✓ Ensure there is diversity in the hiring committee. This sends an important message to interviewees about the organisation's culture, may help more candidates to perform strongly in the interview, and reduces the risk of a less diverse committee privileging a certain candidate profile.
- ✓ Consider bias awareness and training to work towards elimination of discriminatory behaviour for those recruiting and supporting the recruitment process.
- ✓ Seek candidate feedback on the application process.

Promote equitable pay scale and career advancement opportunities

Studies show that diversity and inclusion programs may be successful at meeting employment targets for staff from minority backgrounds, but less so at improving their retention and promotion through equitable career opportunities. Blockages to career development may be formal or informal, meaning that eliminating them is likely to require policy updates as well as cultural change.

- ✓ Make the current state of play visible. Are different genders paid equally at the same level of seniority? Are people with a certain profile promoted at a faster rate?
- ✓ Consult staff to identify the barriers to their career progression.
- ✓ Monitor and enhance the pipelines for people from under-represented groups to move into senior positions.
- ✓ Invest in mentorship programs and professional development for staff, particularly for minority or under-represented groups.
- ✓ Apply a diversity and inclusion lens to the intake of interns and/or youth-focused programs.
- ✓ Establish a system for staff members to request review of their position level or pay grade. This can include situations in which staff have had their responsibilities substantially increased without formal recognition.
- ✓ Include questions relevant to equality, diversity and inclusion in exit interviews to understand if a lack of equitable opportunities is driving talent out of the organisation.

Support staff well-being

Ensuring that quality of working life is equitable across groups and individuals is another facet of diversity and inclusion. It is important to consider the notions of well-being the organisation is promoting; does it favour culturally specific values or sets of practices? What ideas about well-being might be left out? While well-being may be challenging to measure, it often has direct implications for more easily quantifiable markers such as pay scales and career development.

- ✓ Provide appropriate staff benefits, for example, health care/coverage, insurance, and holiday leave and
- ✓ Provide care assistance for staff with dependents or caring responsibilities. For example, child care assistance for those with children, and elder care assistance for employees with responsibilities for elderly parents or other dependents.
- ✓ Make flexible working arrangements a meaningful option. Possibilities may include working from home or adjusted start and finish times.
- ✓ Support staff who are re-entering the workforce after an extended time out for caring, health or other reasons.



Practice spotlight

The recruitment of local staff and new graduates is one of the key practices of one local organisation in Mindanao, Philippines to support the development of local resources. Leaders of this organisation reported intentionally honing this recruitment practice to enable new graduates to acquire skills and knowledge in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change programming. This practice entails removing entry barriers such as lack of experience and focusing instead on mentoring new staff, not only on the technicalities of DRR programming but in interpersonal and leadership skills.

Another organisation tackles prejudices in recruitment by having robust discussions on mental health to ensure that any bias in the selection committee is minimised and instances of voluntary disclosure of mental health issues by a candidate do not lead to discrimination.

A third organisation acknowledged that the nature of project-based work may limit opportunities for field staff to progress in leadership positions. To combat this, it created a career development plan for field staff to align opportunities with staff goals, and progress towards more senior roles.

A fourth organisation supports the professional development of its staff by providing educational assistance to those who aim to pursue further studies.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Antares Foundation, [Managing stress in humanitarian workers: guidelines for good practice](#), March 2012.

CARE International, [Gender in emergencies guidance note: recruiting gender balanced teams](#), September 2014.

CGIR, [Inclusive recruitment: a gender, diversity, and inclusion toolkit for people and culture practitioner](#), April 2021.

International Labour Organization, [Managing work-related psychosocial risks during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#), 2020.

International Labour Organization, [Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond](#), July 2020.

International Labour Organization, [Promoting diversity and inclusion through workplace adjustments: a practical guide](#), 2016.

UNICEF, [Guidance for employers on flexible working arrangements, childcare support and other good workplace practices in the context of COVID-19](#), no date.

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About inSights

inSights (the Institute of Innovation for Gender and Humanitarian Transformation) is a Bangladesh based social enterprise providing insights that challenge the current ways of working in humanitarian aid and gender affairs. inSights aims to transform ideas within the humanitarian, social and businesses sectors, and turns them into innovations, knowledge and strategies. inSights works to equip humanitarian responders – people and organisations with knowledge, skills and competencies that works, so that people affected by crises get the right help when they need it most.

About Humanitarian Advisory Group

Humanitarian Advisory Group (HAG) was founded in 2012 to elevate the profile of humanitarian action in Asia and the Pacific. Set up as a social enterprise, HAG provides a unique space for thinking, research, technical advice and training that can positively contribute to excellence in humanitarian practice.

Humanitarian Horizons

This study was funded under HAG's flagship research program, Humanitarian Horizons – a three-year research initiative supported by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The program adds unique value to humanitarian action in Asian and Pacific contexts by generating evidence-based research and creating conversations for change.

Diverse and Inclusive Humanitarian Leadership

As part of the Humanitarian Horizons research program, Humanitarian Advisory Group is undertaking research to understand how diverse and inclusive leadership can enrich the humanitarian system's capacity to tackle key challenges. It aims to contribute new knowledge about how to strengthen the humanitarian sector and ensure it is fit for purpose. Previous studies in this series are [available via the HAG website](#).

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