

Where do MSD leaders come from? (and where do they go?)

MSD Leadership Brief

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Conception

This **MSD Leadership Brief** is the first product of the MSD Leadership Clinics, a six-month engagement process that involved 42 senior leaders (donors, implementers, and consultants) in 2023. Facilitated small groups explored practical issues related to leadership in programmes that use the MSD approach.

This brief focuses on the varied pathways and backgrounds of individual MSD leaders.

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Where do MSD leaders come from - and where do they go?

This brief showcases the factors that support and constrain opportunities to lead in MSD programmes. It highlights what donors and implementers can do to create more leadership opportunities.

Context

Programme leaders with a combination of MSD knowledge, leadership and management skills are critical to the success of MSD programmes¹. As more MSD programmes are commissioned - with a wider variation in size, scope and emphasis - demand has increased for leaders who can work in different contexts and sectors, towards different objectives, with limited support. At the same time, focus on localisation and strengthening local systems has raised questions about who, and how, programmes are led. Many Implementing organisations now see MSD as a beneficial mindset and skillset to apply across a range of sectors, beyond just private sector development and agriculture. This creates a challenge – to find leaders who are technically sound in MSD and experienced in new technical areas. For individuals, this creates a niche opportunity to translate MSD to new audiences.

Problem:

This brief addresses two problems:

- historically weak leadership development systems, and
- fragmented information on the career trajectories of MSD leaders.

Given the technical complexity of the MSD approach, capacity building efforts have focused on staff skills and programme systems (e.g. MEL/MRM) at the expense of the leadership skills required of management teams. A small pool of skilled, experienced MSD leaders led many of the early MSD programmes, which reinforced a view that only a select few were capable of leading. This became encoded in donor criteria for new programmes and has created barriers to others accessing key leadership positions. Recently, the situation has shifted, as an expanding number of MSD programmes has forced organisations to promote and hire from a wider pool. Nonetheless, there is a lack of information about the varied pathways and experiences of MSD leaders.

Approach and scope:

This brief helps bring structure to the MSD industry's own understanding of the issue. It focuses on growing the pipeline of MSD leaders. It draws on the rich experiences of the 42 participants in the MSD Leadership Clinics, complemented by interviews and surveys on MSD leadership competencies.

Individuals come to MSD from a variety of backgrounds. Documenting and analysing career trajectories provides insight into critical career transitions, influential opportunities, and the supporting role of organisations. There is a particular interest in supporting local leaders to get promoted into higher levels of programme leadership.

¹ There is ongoing work to define and articulate the competencies of [effective MSD Team Leaders](#). Key domains cover topics such as managing donor and HQ expectations; shaping the team's learning culture; strategic thinking about market systems changes; building and managing a team; integrating operational and technical realities. These competencies combine leadership so-called soft skills with the technical requirements of the MSD approach from a management standpoint.

Part 1 - MSD leaders' backgrounds and common career pathways

Part 1 summarises initial findings on different backgrounds and career pathways. This provides important grounding for how donors and implementers have contributed to date, and how they can do better in the future.

Entry points into MSD careers

Because MSD is not a clearly defined occupation, its practitioners are recruited from a wide variety of backgrounds. Most people are first exposed to MSD while working on a programme. The table below summarises different entry points into MSD, the strengths and challenges associated with each. This is part of the backstory of how people come to lead MSD programmes: how did they come into MSD in the first place?

Entry point	Strengths	Challenges
Private sector (marketing, finance, sales, consulting)	- Strong PS networks and relationships. - Can analyse firms and opportunities, communicate credibly to market actors. - Management skills from working in firms.	- Takes time to understand development language, terminology and constraints. - Risk of emphasising business outcomes over target groups.
Direct from university (business, public policy)	- Open to learning new ways of thinking and working. - Not held back by historical ways of doing development.	- Less politically savvy, less credibility with senior stakeholders. - Overly theoretical and/or idealistic.
Development sector (non-PSD, rights-based approaches)	- Extended field work grounds approach in local realities. - Seeing unsustainable approaches builds motivation for MSD.	- Potential resistance to private sector engagement. - Time to learn how to speak and work with businesses. - Unlearning past ways of working (e.g. fixed activities, budgets, targets).
Development sector (PSD, agriculture)	- Bring learning from related approaches (BDS, M4P). - Confident with the private sector, making business cases.	- May struggle to grasp nuances of MSD and the systemic approach. - Tendency to stick to familiar partnerships and business models.
Consulting (firms with an MSD focus)	- Learning directly from MSD experts through mentorship. - Deep knowledge of MSD principles and practices.	- Weaker on operational implementation (contracting, procurement, donor pressures). - Can get stuck in frameworks at expense of practical opportunities.

Pathways to leadership: profiles of real MSD practitioners

1. “Growth chamber”

Rapid growth and learning of technical staff who rise to lead MSD programmes

Intensive immersion in a larger, longer-term MSD programme that allows simultaneous development of MSD knowledge/expertise and leadership skills, rising through technical ranks to senior management positions. From programme leadership, several options are available.

Driven by:

- A powerful internal programme culture and system of promotion that rapidly grows leaders and prepares them to lead in other programmes and contexts
- Individuals who are committed to stay in the programme, master technical challenges, and grow as a leader within the programme.

Examples:

- **Fouzia Nasreen:** Director at Katalyst to M4C TL to international consultant
- **Razik Fazle:** Katalyst new hire to group manager, MSD portfolio lead at SDC, TL in Ethiopia then return to various TL and technical advisory roles in Bangladesh
- **Bidowra Khan:** Katalyst lead to ACDI/VOCA inclusive development (MSD, GESI and Access to Finance) technical expert

2. “Unexpected roots & shoots”

Staff and consultants who rise to leadership through non-technical routes (e.g. Operations, MEL)

Programme staff working in non-technical teams (e.g. MEL, Operations) that grow their leadership skills and MSD understanding, become managers of their function and then senior leaders.

Driven by:

- Growing credibility for understanding MSD and its implications for non-technical functions, and deep familiarity with a programme’s culture and dynamics that are rewarded when an internal opening is created.

Examples:

- **Nina FitzSimons** (comms & KM consultant -> COO -> CEO, PRISMA, Palladium) Nina entered PRISMA as a short-term consultant doing knowledge management, which led to other consultancies over a 5-year period in capacity development, communications, and operational support in procurement, HR and grants management. In Phase 2, she took on Chief Operations Officer and after 2 years became acting TL which enabled a ‘proving ground’. Applied and was offered a permanent TL position.
- **Erka Caro** (MRM lead -> Deputy PM, Skills for Jobs, Swisscontact)
- **Raul Pitoro** (MEL specialist -> MEL manager -> COP, Inova, DAI)
- **Judy Odongo** (MEL manager -> DCOP, Kenya Crops & Dairy Market Systems, RTI)

3. “Strictly business”

Private sector middle managers that transition rapidly to MSD leadership positions

Experienced private sector middle managers recruited for their insight into business. They absorb MSD quickly and adjust to the development sector, bringing confidence and management skills to support rapid transition to leadership positions at programme or organisational levels. With strong mentorship, they can leapfrog into senior leadership roles as team leaders or technical support staff

Driven by:

- Implementers hiring for competency over prior development experience
- Rapid learning as managers use private sector insights to sharpen MSD programme strategies. Over time, these insights get transferred to other team members through mentorship, building confidence and credibility of the manager.

Examples:

- **Meseret Tefera**, Mercy Corps Ethiopia. Meseret was hired as National MSD advisor for Ethiopia directly from the private sector. After demonstrating value addition in backstopping roles, became Mercy Corps' TL on the LIWAY programme. Is currently on short-term assignment as MSD Director in Jordan.
- **Dhita Radcliffe**, Mercy Corps. Started as technical leader on PRISMA. Rose quickly to leadership roles, then switched to consulting to broaden her experience. Now plays a critical MSD technical support role at Mercy Corps, building capacity of leadership teams. Is currently team lead for startup of large complex MSD programme in Ethiopia.
- **Maryam Piracha**, MDF Country Director, Sri Lanka. Maryam moved from a multinational firm to MDF Pakistan (worked up technical ranks) then to PRISMA for a senior leadership role, and back to MDF Sri Lanka to become Country Director.
- **Robert Katende**, Consultant, Uganda. had several roles in banking/consulting then worked five years on an MSD programme in Uganda. Based on this experience, transitioned to independent consulting in East Africa on a variety of MSD programmes.

4. "Movers & shakers"

Technical leaders who transition to international TL and/or consultant

Leaders who learn MSD in their own country, take on leadership roles, and move into international roles² in other countries. Often, the move to other countries coincided with individuals switching organisations.

Driven by:

- Mobility between countries builds insight, broadens experience and grows leadership capabilities. Individuals' commitment to MSD builds a sense of continuity over time.
- Absence of opportunities for learning and growth locally. For example, current programme is at the end of life with no clear follow-on from any donor.
- Implementers keen to retain high performers and bridge talent gaps in other countries
- Consulting firms looking to hire practical MSD knowledge/experience from the field

Examples:

- **Argjentina Gradzhani** (Team Leader, PPSE Kosovo, Swisscontact)– left Kosovo to gain experience abroad, returned as TL, and MSD expert who knows the local context.
- **Wahyu Nugroho** (Team Leader, Inclusive & Green Economic Development in Myanmar, Mercy Corps) – leveraging placements and short-term opportunities to find new contexts, expand skillset and become a TL.
- **John Rachkara** (DCOP, Rural Resilience Activity Nigeria, Mercy Corps) – extended MSD learning in Uganda, applied in other countries in Africa (e.g. Nigeria)

² This pathway is analysed in much more detail in forthcoming research from The Canopy Lab's [Inclusion & Leadership series](#), Instalment 6: Career Mobility of National MSD Professionals

- **Richard Rose** (Team Leader, Rural SMEs Development Georgia, Swisscontact) – started as an intern in IDE in the UK and then moved progressively through management roles with IDE in Bangladesh. Then held three country director and TL roles in Cambodia, Laos, and now Georgia with Swisscontact.

5. “Loyal stalwarts”

MSD leaders who transition to country level and organisational HQ leadership positions to help build and support other programmes

A number of MSD leaders ultimately transition to organisational roles with implementers at country, regional or global levels. This embeds knowledge and expertise in long-term roles but shifts it from ‘within’ programmes’ to ‘outside’ programmes.

Driven by:

- Job security and long-term continuity for individuals – ultimately tiring/difficult to continue to move constantly or chase programmes with uncertainty and short time cycles
- Desire to support or benefit a larger number of programmes, and/or to be involved in designing programmes from an earlier stage in the programme lifecycle.

Examples:

- **Ailsa Buckley**, ISD Global Guardian, Swisscontact – long-standing MSD champion at organisational and regional level; senior programme advisor.
- **Mahlet Seifu**, Mercy Corps Ethiopia – from TL of multiple programmes to portfolio director at country level.
- **Rajiv Pradhan**, Swisscontact Cambodia – from providing MSD training in Nepal to co-creating institutional MSD tools in IDE and Swisscontact; now ensuring all programmes follow an MSD approach.
- **Sergio Rivas**, ACDI/VOCA / Tanager) – from USAID technical staff to TL of a large MSD programme, to organisational leader (president of Tanager)

6. “Global nomads”

International MSD consultants and technical experts who become team leaders

There is a common pathway whereby MSD consultants go on to become MSD team leaders after a period of work on training, advisory, research and learning. Many on this pathway have programme experience, but what is notable from a pathways’ perspective is the movement between consultancy firms and programme leadership positions.

Driven by:

- Exposure and credibility of MSD consulting firms builds the technical skill and confidence to apply MSD principles on a specific programme. This is premised on the quality of internal mentorship to help consultants master MSD and reinforce this by teaching and advising.
- For some, consultancy (independent or with a firm) is desirable because of the flexibility, and chance to have a home base in a chosen country/location.

Examples:

- **Daniel Nippard** (Springfield -> MarketMakers TL -> consultant/ILO),
- **Ashley Aarons** (BEAM Exchange -> MarketShare > Mercy Corps HQ role -> Oxfam TL),
- Other Examples: **Mike Field, Julian Peach, Tim Stewart, Holly Krueger, Tim Sparkman, Harald Bekkers, Ron Ashkin**

Part 2 - supporting and constraining leadership opportunities

What can be learned from the common pathways that MSD leaders take in their careers? Five supporting conditions were identified that are key to learning and leadership growth. Two are 'core' to many careers, while three relate to particular situations that can present opportunities.

Core supporting conditions for all MSD leaders

1. **Managers** that identify, select and amplify talent with unique skillsets.
 - Managers support staff in entry level roles on MSD programmes, push them out of their comfort zone, and create opportunities to try things (lead a new intervention, present at conference).
 - TLs learn about their team members' interests and aspirations through regular conversations. This discipline has helped organisations to retain and promote rising stars.
 - Managers and other organisational leaders open doors for people by recommending internal opportunities for networking and training³.
 - BOX: How leaders create a culture of leadership development will be the focus of Brief 3.
2. **Informal relationships and networks** connect MSD leaders to the wider field.
 - Informal relationships help introduce and grow MSD capabilities in future leaders.
 - Networks open access to peer support to navigate complex situations and hierarchies.
 - International events can be a turning point to gain knowledge and think beyond the programme.
 - In-country networks offer a similar function but at a smaller, safer scale.

Special situations – unique opportunities

3. **Crisis creates opportunities** (e.g. new leadership, changing technical approach, reduced budgets, conflict situation). For many, major changes or shocks to a programme created the need for a change in leadership that opened an opportunity for rising stars to step up. In this situation, the donor and implementer both need to agree to trust someone who is 'unproven'.

Example: PRISMA lost its Team Leader and Deputy both within a month. At the time, Nina FitzSimons had been Chief Operations Officer on the programme for two years. She was made Acting TL while the implementer did an intensive open recruitment process for a replacement TL, including psychometric testing, technical case studies and multiple rounds of interviews with different panels, including the donor. Ultimately Nina was selected as the CEO, having proven herself as Acting TL through an intensive strategy refresh for the whole programme.

4. **Switching organisations:**
Many leaders switched organisation at key turning points in their career to broaden their experience, break away from a 'glass ceiling' of a small programme, move away from a stagnant culture, or head towards better opportunities. Consulting roles have enabled leaders to build skills and confidence and learn about MSD application in different countries or different markets.

³ The Canopy Lab highlights sponsorship, visibility and training as three key catalysts of career mobility.

5. **Placements** move staff to new locations in the same organisation to expand their experience⁴. This requires institutionalisation to deal with cross-border compensation. In some cases, has also required advocating that the donor approves the allocation of programme time to other places.
- Gatsby Africa embeds HQ staff in programmes for set periods of time
 - Mercy Corps has a structure for staff to take short-term placements (3-6 months) in other countries.

Constraints that limit leadership development

6. Lack of intentional leadership skill-building

A critical constraint to leadership development is the limited resources allocated to training, mentorship and support for programme leaders. MSD leaders need a wide array of capabilities: systems thinking, stakeholder relationships, managing politics and developing a team. There is a strong bias to technical learning within existing skill-building efforts. Leaders faced a 'sink or swim' mentality from implementers who expect new leaders to figure out the role on their own.

7. The 'closed shop' – to become a team leader you have to be a team leader already

Several institutional biases limit access to senior leadership positions in MSD programmes. There is still a widely held mental model that a team leader should be an expatriate. This gets reinforced by programme bidding criteria and implementer salary scales that differentiate international from local positions. Research by The Canopy Lab⁵ has shown how donor criteria for team leaders gets filtered through the recruitment processes and business development strategies of implementers to reinforce the perception that there is only a small pool of "safe" team leader candidates. A large majority of emerging MSD practitioners are blocked from being positioned as TL candidates on bids based on their citizenship, race or sex. The consequence is that a smaller elite group of team leaders continue to be hired for these roles.

8. Short programme cycles

MSD programmes are short-term and time-bound, which creates many problems for individuals seeking continuity in their learning and career trajectories. The end of the programme prevents continuity in leadership growth and provokes considerable anxiety and turmoil as staff seek their next position. programmes suffer high turnover at pivotal moments for scaling-up, and often a lack of budget for onboarding at late stages of a programme. Some implementers have found creative ways to overcome this, but it is the exception not the norm.

9. Organisational (HQ) turnover and chasing new business

In a competitive funding environment, implementers are constantly pulled towards winning new programmes, sometimes at the expense of supporting existing programmes. Dedicated technical back-stoppers and support units find their time diverted to proposal writing, decreasing their attention to programme needs. Among those needs, leadership is likely to fall to the bottom of the list in favour of more urgent pressures. This pattern can creep into Team Leader roles too, as many TLs get enlisted in bid writing. Of course, there are important exceptions. Committed and supported individuals at HQ can focus their energy on investing in TLs and creating the space for TLs to focus their attention and energy on the learning and growth of their teams.

⁴ Short-term assignments are another of the five key catalysts for career mobility of national MSD professionals.

⁵ www.thecanopylab.com/industry-perspectives-on-the-impact-of-restrictive-criteria-in-senior-leader-job-descriptions/

Part 3 - Implementer strategies to shape leadership opportunities

The elephant in the room for supporting leadership development is funding. Who has the incentive to invest in leadership development for MSD? Especially when prevailing messages downplay the development of leaders, and instead encourage hiring from the market, accepting the reality of high turnover and churn, etc.

Why implementers spend their own unrestricted funding on leadership development

Implementers identified retention and loyalty of capable staff as the overriding incentive. Organisations that invest in and promote individuals, and keep them happy, are likely to retain them for longer, provided:

- attractive opportunities are available when a programme comes to an end, and
- implementers allow flexibility and support as individuals' life circumstances change

In longer-term, multi-phase programmes, the benefits are easier to see, and the risks of losing staff after three or four years are also lower. The incentive to invest in front-line staff and middle managers as future leaders of the programme can be reinforced in situations where programmes struggle to hire experienced MSD leaders (because of budget constraints or a difficult recruitment environment).

The incentive for implementers to invest in their leaders is less in larger organisations for whom MSD is only a small part of the portfolio. When working with shorter time horizons, and a primarily commercial point of view, organisations can fall prey to prioritising highly paid team leaders while holding back from investing in middle managers and proactively reaching out to promising staff to build their future with the organisation.

Reframing the 'poaching problem'

The counterpoint to seeing retention of staff as an incentive is the argument "Why should I invest in programme staff if my competitors are just going to poach them?". This viewpoint is a blockage for many implementers and challenging it is critical to unlocking leadership development.

Turnover is costly in any programme, but it is exacerbated in MSD programmes. The emphasis on rare skillsets and intensive relationships means it can take years to rehire or retrain to fill the space of a highly skilled MSD practitioner on any given programme.

The problem in this logic is that it risks keeping the industry stuck in a cycle of underinvestment in staff that will make MSD harder to implement well, weakening results and potentially undermining the credibility of the approach. Instead, what is needed is a longer-term more expansive vision:

- **Implementers** need to train and mentor as many as possible in **every** programme. Recognise that there will be some turnover and attrition but strive to see the bigger picture - skilled MSD staff will leave to work on other MSD programmes, growing the overall pool of talent.
- **Implementers** need to let go of the mindset of 'my programme' and support staff members who want to move on to other opportunities. The analysis of pathways and profiles clearly shows that often MSD leaders return to earlier organisations they worked for (assuming culture and working conditions are favourable).
- **Implementers** need to get better at writing leadership development into all programme proposals – to show the donor they are serious. They also need to dedicate their own core/unrestricted funding to leadership development beyond just individual programmes. There is evidence of this as an emerging industry norm, but it needs to be amplified.
 - Mercy Corps is funding an internal leadership development programme
 - Swisscontact funding for internal MSD leadership clinics
 - Chemonics is sending DCOPs to conferences to give them exposure

How implementers can be intentional in creating desirable pathways for MSD leaders

Creating leadership pathways starts with a more intentional approach to career development and planning - one that creates security for individuals in a professional arrangement, so they feel part of the organisation, not just part of the programme. This is reinforced in the pathways identified where leaders stick with one implementing organisation for an extended time (5-10 years), either by moving from one programme to another (**Movers & Shakers**), or by moving between programme roles and organisational roles in country offices or at the organisation's HQ (**Loyal Stalwarts**).

One practical lever is annual performance appraisal conversations. Organisations need to communicate frequently to understand existing and future leaders' interests and ambitions – to learn, to move, and to lead (**Movers and Shakers**). Sometimes the learning needs of leaders may trump an organisational need, in order to keep a particularly strong leader engaged (**Loyal Stalwarts**). Longer-term retention means considering the incentives for long-standing leaders to work in programme leadership roles vs in organisational leadership roles. Are there openings for movement between these tracks? And is there enough MSD expertise in HQ roles to enable effective backstopping, valued by the programme leaders themselves?

Beyond career planning, implementers need to act as learning organisations that 'induct' leaders into MSD and keep supporting them on their journey. This can take different forms:

- a) a commitment to MSD as a core organisational principle,
- b) providing field experience to staff supported by mentorship and inspiration, or \
- c) having a structural intent and mandate around learning.

Example: Swisscontact and the elevation of MSD to a working principle.

A small group of champions, who believed in MSD, sought out like-minded people across the organisation. The small group remained patient, focused and persistent. It was an organic journey, but ultimately led to key positions, job titles, dedicated funding for the development of practitioner training, team induction and mentoring processes for MSD.

Over the longer-term, organisations that commit to a learning culture with MSD as a core principle are more likely to build a stronger portfolio of MSD programmes, backed by robust support units that invest in middle managers and field staff. This creates a momentum of its own.

- **Mercy Corps** - intentional investment in building expertise over time in a variety of roles, cultivating local leaders with lots of 1:1 support/other country opportunities
- **Helvetas Eastern Europe** – strong portfolio of MSD programmes with dedicated regional support staff (MSD experts)

MSD portfolios may be formed at global, regional or country levels. A few key countries have yielded disproportionate numbers of MSD leaders that have gone on to succeed in their field (**Growth Chamber**). Strong country office teams with high MSD expertise can offer better capacity-building support to programme teams. This also improves the quality of proposals, the strength of **programme** design, and coherence of start-up phases.

- **Mercy Corps Ethiopia** (Country Director, programmes officer, national MSD advisor)
- **Swisscontact Bolivia** (multiple programmes, strong MSD experts)

Organisations may also want to consider a regional talent development strategy to balance needs in different regions and create opportunities for leaders across the organisation (**Movers and Shakers**). There is a close linkage between strong MSD country/regional offices and multi-phase programmes, which provide the opportunity for intentional, purposeful and resourced leadership development.

- **KATALYST** trained a large number of staff who mastered MSD and left the programme to spread good practice. They became ambassadors for the programme, and for MSD at large.
- **PRISMA** developed a batch-hiring strategy to hire large cohorts of 20+ new field staff every year, and more recently developed a tailored coaching & mentoring initiative for middle managers to grow these skills in the final year(s) of implementation.
- **ALCP Caucasus** (Georgia) has had an extremely high retention of staff over a long period with strong institutional memory, relationships and learning culture.

At a programme level, implementers can help create the conditions for **Growth Chamber** pathways on more of their programmes by paying heed to the following guidance:

- Investing in capacity early in programme life, including MSD training for technical and operations staff & internal mentorship structures (**Growth Chamber**)
- Allocating time for MSD managers to dedicate to mentoring & coaching programme staff – those new to the programme (**Growth Chamber**), new to MSD (**Unexpected Roots & Shoots**), or new to development (**Strictly Business**)
- Encouraging programme management teams to include Operations and MEL leads fully in technical strategy discussions. (**Unexpected Roots & Shoots**)
- Redesigning hiring processes towards a competency-based model to attract non-traditional candidates (e.g. managers from private/public sectors) (**Strictly business**)

Part 4 - Donor roles in shaping leadership opportunities

Many tangible strategies for shaping leadership opportunities are led by implementers. And yet, this costs money. For implementers to increase the budgets for leadership development in various forms, they will need to convince donors this is worth spending on.

Donors need to see that their investment in MSD capacity-building is not only a necessary programme cost to deliver better results, but also a public good: strengthening MSD capacities and skills across programmes and organisations will ultimately improve the effectiveness of development work.

When it comes to challenging the myth that all good staff will get poached, donors can help influence implementer thinking by:

- emphasising the benefits of investing in talented and trained people beyond the current programme they are currently working for.
- letting go of the mental model that “because you won the programme, it means your team knows how to do MSD already”. MSD is not equivalent to sectoral expertise, which can be proxied by highly qualified individual members. Instead, MSD requires collective capacity and shared understanding – this needs to be built from the ground up in every single programme. Donors therefore need to fund substantial capacity-building in every single MSD programme to yield results. If implementers haven’t budgeted for this in their proposal, they need to be called out and encouraged to allocate resources to this.

Example: Sida DRC programme: UNIDO proposed the idea of a programme-level MSD HelpDesk, which required additional resources. Sida was supportive and agreed to fund it.

The 'business case' for donors to create more leadership opportunities

Amidst the current drive towards localisation and nationalisation, investing in infrastructure and a talent pipeline is a practical part of realising this longer-term ambition. Investment in capacity development occurs in a competitive labour market, so donors should expect staff to move around.

Three tangible strategies for donors emerged from the clinics:

1. Flag the importance of leadership development in procurement processes

One of the biggest leverage points is the requirements donors set for MSD programmes in procurement and tender documents. Not all MSD programmes are competitively awarded, but even in unsolicited proposals and programme co-creation processes, donors have significant influence over how implementers value leadership development. Specific suggestions include:

De-emphasise the importance of 'hero' leaders with highly specialised expertise and large numbers of years' experience.

When bid scoring allocates substantial points to the team leader, it sends implementers on a chase for CVs that look good, rather than reflecting on how to build and nurture leaders at multiple levels. Removing or decreasing point allocations to one or two key personnel is a useful step. A more incremental change is to encourage more expansive views of 'what counts as experience' – to break the 'closed shop' cycle.

Example: DFAT reformed its experience criteria for a TL to be less about 'number of years' and more about 'what counts as experience', which enabled a non-traditional candidate to succeed in an open competitive process for a replacement TL position on an MSD programme

Emphasise leadership teams rather than individuals.

An alternative to individual leaders is for donors to ask for more information about a broader team, such as its structure, relationships and complementary skillsets. There is still an unrealistic assumption that an implementer can reliably predict which individuals will form the team on a programme that is months, to years, from starting, given the other uncertainties and competing opportunities. But it's an important step to take, and signal to send, in de-emphasising "the" leader of an MSD programme.

Example: USAID has experimented with different approaches to articulating requirements for the leadership team during the solicitation process. These include:

- Requesting team, rather than individual qualifications (e.g. Market Systems and Partnerships).
- Letting implementers themselves propose the key senior management positions and leadership structure, as well as minimum qualifications and the actual candidates (e.g. Rwanda Employment & Entrepreneurship, Ethiopia Food and Agriculture System Transformation, and Ghana Market Systems and Resilience).
- Separating the leadership team structure and qualifications from the actual candidates. Implementers would only submit the actual candidates for approval after the award (e.g. Climate Finance for Development Accelerator),

Require implementers to articulate how they will support leadership teams in their proposals

Donors can shift from asking ‘who will lead?’ to the more important question of ‘how will you support leadership learning and growth?’, which is a more enduring corporate capability. Some tangible options for how implementers can show this include:

- demonstrate a track record in talent development: training and mentorship of individuals, with pathways for people to move up/between programmes and between countries. (Reward past and present ‘Growth Chamber’ type programmes, provided the organisation can reflect and apply learning from those onto future programmes)
- show partnerships with organisations that offer high-quality internal training, coaches and mentors (see a later brief for a range of leadership supports that could rapidly grow in popularity if they were seen as critical to strong MSD proposals)
- offer innovative ways to nurture MSD talent through the course of programme implementation.

2. Require staff development plans as a regular part of programme management / oversight (annual planning)

Implementers should be building training, learning and middle manager growth into proposals and programming design, budgets and targets. But rather than being a tick-box exercise at the proposal or design phase, donors can keep asking programmes about their work on staff and leadership development during implementation. A simple way to do this is to ask for MSD programmes to produce a simple staff development plan as a part of regular programme management and to check in on how it’s going. This might be a mix of broad initiatives that support the whole team, and more targeted investments in particular individuals (with a clear rationale).

Example: In the CASA programme, the training and mentoring of the key implementation team was written into the project document. This allowed management to craft a programme of continuous support to the team, from induction and refresher trainings to ongoing mentoring. For example, tailored capacity building based on competency gaps was provided both as individual and team-based support during the programme’s early stages.

3. Ask about and approve budgeting for leadership development (ongoing)

Finally, a more week-to-week pulse on staffing issues and leadership development from donor staff cements the importance of this area. In-country donor staff can ask programme teams about initiatives, learning and progress. As donors gain more insight into the profile of the team, the mentorship skills of leaders, and the learning that is happening, this can provide reassurance on the value of spending on leadership development. In an ideal scenario (with high trust and buy-in from donor and programme), the team leader’s own learning and growth could even be a focus of occasional strategic discussions. In addition, team leaders can communicate the growth and development of emerging leaders, and the donor can ask about opportunities to maximise their broader exposure and learning.

Example: In the TMS Honduras programme, the Team Leader and donor representative discussed senior management growth and learning annually to inform the work plan. Topics included performance and professional development pathways and created opportunities for TMS managers to be strategically exposed to training, coaching and other leadership opportunities (such as writing a blog or presenting at an international forum). TMS has nurtured a crop of managers that has grown from technical leads to component managers, with plans to grow them to senior leadership levels.

Appendix: Advice for individuals

Advice for individuals seeking different career pathways to leadership	
Pathway	Advice
“Growth chamber” Rapid growth and learning of technical staff who rise to lead MSD programmes	Understand the programme’s learning culture and management system. Look for excellent MSD leaders as managers and mentors. Timeframe of programme is key – need a ‘long runway’ (3-5 years) left on programme to experience sufficient growth.
“Unexpected roots & shoots” Staff and consultants who rise to leadership through non-technical routes (e.g. Operations, MEL)	Ask for, and take advantage of, as much MSD technical training as possible. Go to the field, understand partnerships and market dynamics in as much detail as possible. Make the case for technical staff to also ‘switch’ and apply their skills to roles on the MEL team (e.g. MDF dynamic between MEL/quality team and sector teams, horizontal career paths created and encouraged)
“Strictly business” Private sector middle managers that transition rapidly to MSD leadership positions	Find mentors who have been through the transition to accelerate learning and normalise particular challenges (e.g. norms, language, speed of work, hierarchy) Show staff the benefits of switching to the private sector.
“Movers & shakers” Technical leaders who transition to international TL and/or consultant	Recognised and high quality MSD implementation experience is a critical prerequisite to this pathway. Willingness to move is also required. Opportunity to test ideas, challenge assumptions and see ‘what works’ in new contexts.
“Loyal stalwarts” MSD leaders who transition to organisational positions and help build/support other programmes	Consider the benefits and trade-offs of moving away from the field level: broadened scope, more resources/visibility but less involvement in implementation details.
“Global nomads” International MSD consultants and technical experts who become team leaders	MSD consultancy offers a unique skill-sharpening environment. A chance to consolidate experiences, improve communication skills and support uptake of MSD approach. There is a chance to oscillate between in-depth field experience as programme leader, and broad exposure to contextual differences worldwide as a consultant.