



A Catalyst for Change: A Multi-level Systems Perspective of Organisational Inequality in INGOs and HR's Influence in Systematic Power Asymmetries

Executive Summary by Nora Mohn

Context and Rationale

Recent reports have established internal inequalities and structural discrimination of minority group members in INGOs. This has contributed to INGOs being scrutinised for building on neo-colonial and neo-liberal premises, thus diminishing the legitimacy and undermining the social values INGOs seek to promote. It is therefore crucial for INGOs to actively understand inequality in their internal operations and strive to establish cultures of global inclusion and collaboration. The present study aimed to understand; 1) how inequality is manifested in the sector, by applying a multi-level systems perspective to inequality, and 2) what the role of HRM is, and how internal policies and practices may work to either enhance or alleviate inequalities in the sector.

Research Method

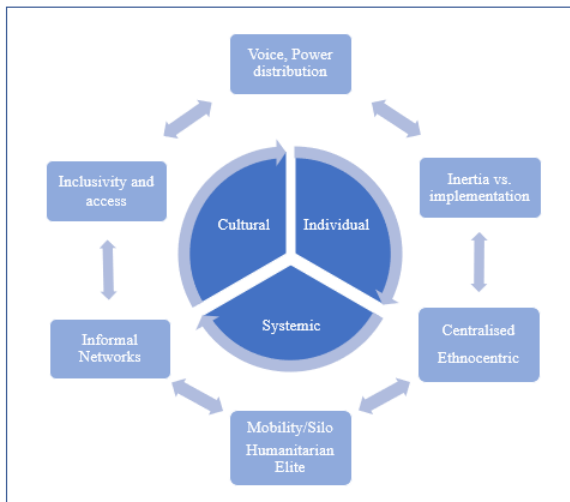
By taking a multi-method qualitative approach, this research conducted 1 focus group and 10 semi-structured interviews with HR and DEI leaders in the sector. The data collection was conducted with multiple organisations to ensure the sample is representative across the INGO sector. The criterion for representativeness was measured based on the definition presented; professionalised, self-governing and non-profit organisations that operates on an international level with operations both in the Global North and Global South.

The focus group guide had two sections, each relating to one research question. The first part sought to explore the general perceptions of fairness and equality in the sector whilst the second section focused on understanding HR's role in promoting or attenuating inequality. The interview structure emphasised flexibility, and questions were framed openly to allow participants to freely contribute their perceptions and experiences. All data was transcribed, and a thematic analysis was adopted to the process and interpret the data.

Findings

1. Interactive system of inequality in INGOs

The findings from the study uncovered factors at the person, group and systems level in the organisation, all highly embedded to create an interactive system of inequality. Indeed, factors at person, cultural and systems levels were identified and highly interconnected to form a complex and strongly embedded system of inequality within the sector.



Systemic Level	<p><u>Structure</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Top-down, paternalistic principles were found to establish asymmetric power dynamics in the sector. 3 participants were decentralised, 4 were explicitly centralised and 3 organisations indicated moving towards a decentralised structure by enabling mobility of HQ roles. However, in the latter group, the majority of power and top-level management still resided in the Global North. ○ All organisations that took part had centralised resources in the Global North.
	<p><u>Global Mobility</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 3 participants indicated having diversity on executive boards. Findings indicate that this is due to an issue of mobility, in which HQ house most executive management, with relocation requirements placed on top-management positions. ○ 3 participants explicitly state they are a siloed organisation, however, with centralised structures in place, several organisations also implicitly indicate similar mindsets to operations.
	<p><u>Ethnocentric DEI</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ There is an ambiguity or lack of awareness around how to tackle inequality in the sector. ○ There is a general ethnocentric lens to DEI which is often applied and does not reflect the cultural context in which they are working.
Group Level:	<u>Informal Networks</u>



<p>Globally Inclusive Culture</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A limited focus on talent management and career progression forces employees to rely on informal networks to find information about opportunities, mentoring and networking and progression. ○ These networks are largely centred around headquarters in the Global North.
	<p><u>Voice and Global Inclusion</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Similar to informal networks, voice initiatives are largely focused on employees in the Global North. Manifested through siloed mindsets. ○ Organisation-wide taskforces are identified as a highly common form of participation and cross-country collaboration across the sector and reflects a shift towards more globally inclusive cultures and voice for many organisations.
<p>Individual level: Actor's power and responsibility for DEI</p>	<p><u>HR and Line Managers</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A tension was found between line managers and HR managers regarding implementation of DEI initiatives. ○ Line Manager were identified as crucial stakeholders to DEI. Seen as implementers with a cultural responsibility for inclusion of employees.

2. HR and Organisational Inequality:

HR managers were identified as catalysts for change. All participants agreed that DEI shouldn't sit with HR, but rather that it is an organisation-wide issue. However, as DEI is closely aligned with HR practices, they are important stakeholders for enabling and empowering DEI through HR strategic frameworks. Recruitment and career development were emphasised as key HR practices that traditionally reproduce inequalities across the sector.

Recruitment:

Professionalisation raises hiring requirements for roles and establishes a humanitarian elite, in which experienced humanitarians are recycled and re-hired in multiple organisations. This shuts out potential hires *"who may not have had access to such opportunities but could still do the work if given the chance"* (IP17). A focus on recruitment and reviewing policies and hiring requirements was mentioned by several participants and is the most adopted DEI initiative.

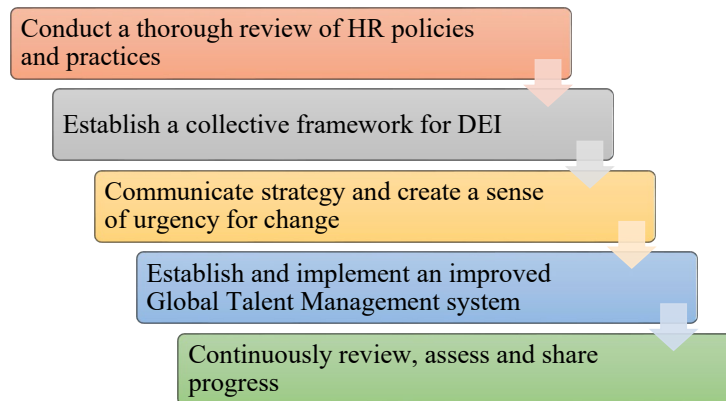
Development:

Career development was found as a clear limitation for INGOs due to the urgency of hires and lack of resources. *"There's an unwillingness to look at that talent as potential that could grow into the job. I think the attitude is we simply don't have the bandwidth to spend time developing that person, and I think that means you create this structural inequality"* (IP14).



Recommendations

The findings indicate that a lack of understanding or strategic framework to DEI exists, which creates ambiguity and a lack of collective awareness towards the needs and challenges of the sector. The recommendations below, and presented in the figure, aim to provide a step-based implementation plan for mitigating ambiguity and creating a holistic understanding of inequality in the sector.



Step 1: Thorough external review of HR policies in practices:

Based on the findings, it was made evident that organisations differed highly with the amount of time and resources put into improving DEI. Moreover, a clear lack of strategic framework made the work largely ad-hoc and unstructured. Therefore, a thorough review of the current policies and procedures in place must be made in order for organisations to be aware of how other practices, going beyond compensation and recruitment, may influence inequality. This study recommends the use of an external consultant, of which the cost can be split across multiple organisations and collaborating with other INGOs may make the initiative more time- and cost-effective.

Step 2: Establish a collective framework for DEI

The findings from the above reviews should be collectively shared with Project FAIR and the DEI forum in order to establish a collective framework to increase accountability and transparency. By establishing accountability to each other, a set of minimum standards can be established, and process-ambiguity mitigated.

Step 3: Communicate strategy and create a sense of urgency for change

As participants indicated a barrier to DEI surrounding line-managers unwillingness to change, it is important to utilise change management theory and ensure continuous communication of initiatives, placing emphasis on educating managers to understand why the change is important and what it aims to accomplish. By creating a sense of urgency and an understanding of *why* change needs to occur, line management may be more willing to change and become an important ally in the process.

Step 4: Establish and implement an improved Global Talent Management system



An important finding in the study found employees relying heavily on informal networks and structures to enter and progress through the organisation. An improved Global Talent Management system should be created which seeks to attract, motivate and retain employees, enhance focus on hiring for potential and offer all employees opportunities for personal and professional development through internal mobility and global collaboration. This will not only make employees more motivated and increase well-being and productivity, but it may also reduce cost of turnover and loss of important, high-performing employees.

Step 5: Continuously review, assess and share progress

The DEI forum is an invaluable forum enabling a collaborative, cross-sectoral approach to share, review and discuss best practices, challenges and progress. This should continue to be utilised, with an emphasis on sharing challenges, rather than simply achievements.

Conclusion

The research established an interactive and multi-level system of inequality in INGOs. HR policies and practices are important tools for alleviating inequalities, however a lack of resources placed on sophisticated talent management systems increase challenges for inclusion and equality, with a lack of framework and initiatives that tackle the deep-rooted and structural power dynamics traditionally in place. Further research must investigate, in detail, the current HR policies and procedures' impact on DEI and enable a culture of global inclusion and mobility.