Leadership for SDG 6.2: Is diversity missing?

42nd WEDC International Conference

ONLINE: 13 – 15 September, 2021

EQUITABLE AND SUSTAINABLE WASH SERVICES:
FUTURE CHALLENGES IN A RAPIDLY CHANGING WORLD

Leadership for SDG 6.2: is Diversity missing?

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Introduction

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the global sanitation sector have not been the subject of extensive research. In recent years, there has been a move towards hiring more national staff for in-country teams; however, beyond this, DEI policies in the sanitation workforce have received minimal attention. This research presents the first quantitative study of leadership demographics within the sector, filling an essential gap, uncovering some of the sector's existing inequalities, and creating a baseline to measure future progress. Racial and gender justice is a driver for this research, but equally is the attainment of SDG 6. Without diverse and representative leadership, the sector will continue to misunderstand the needs of those it serves (largely Black, Indigenous, and other People of Colour (BIPOC) from Low-Middle Income Countries (LMICs)) and to see further policy failures and the inefficient use of resources.

Methods

The authors compiled a list of 100 of key global sanitation stakeholder organisations including funders, implementers, research and policy organizations, partnership coalitions, advocacy groups, and bilateral and multilateral organizations. From these organisations, data was collected on 1472 individuals on the board, leadership, and sanitation teams regarding their job title, sex, race, age, economic status of the country of origin, economic status of the country of work, university, and postgraduate qualification (PhD or MBA). The data was analysed and disaggregated based on these categories.

Results

The study results showed that older, white males from High-Income Countries (HICs) held over a third of all leadership positions analysed. White people represented over two-thirds of all sanitation leaders, with white leaders being 8.7 times more likely to hold multiple positions across different organisations than BIPOC, demonstrating the clear preference for whiteness in power positions. 88 out of 100 organisations were headquartered in a HIC, and education data showed a huge dominance of western institutions. White men held the demographic majorities (almost 50%) in advocacy and policy organisations, which have the most influence in setting the direction and strategy of the sector. BIPOC women were the least represented group across all data sets, highlighting the importance of intersectional perspectives when discussing gender and racial equality issues.

Discussion

A 'glass ceiling' exists preventing national staff, particularly BIPOC women, from rising into power positions. This raises concerns regarding the presence of neo-colonial structures and the failure to share power with marginalised groups. To address these issues, the internal workings of sanitation organisations and the wider structures of the sector must be confronted. Institutional policies are key to hardwiring DEI principles into the

foundation of an organisation. Multiple and complementary approaches such as inclusive hiring and DEI staff training are starting points for transformation. As for the wider sector, a larger emphasis on hiring, training, and promoting local staff should be made, with headquarters being established or relocated in the country of work. Alongside these efforts, our global attitudes towards what a leader should look like must evolve. More organisational data should be made available, and further research needs to be conducted on these topics if true change is to be seen in time for 2030.

Conclusion

Sanitation leadership has a clear HIC and white male bias, which is linked to sectoral failure to meet the needs of BIPOC in LMICs. This research is a benchmark for further research, contributing to the absence of data in this area and as a route into a more informed discourse on sanitation DEI. Further research is required if a change is to be seen by 2030, such as the effects of DEI on environmental, social, and governance (ESG) impacts or on budget efficiency. As for organizational development, studying the influence of rigorous DEI policies on workforce and leadership demographics would increase understanding of what works for institutional sanitation reform. A larger study could be conducted on workforce demographics at the grassroots level to see how this compares with the demographics of leaders as presented in this study.

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