

Re-imagining Leadership in the Environmental Sector

Co-Designing Pathways to
Diversity

January 2026

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Introduction

Diversity in Environmental Leadership Today

The environmental sector remains one of the UK's least ethnically diverse professional spheres. According to the [2024 RACE Report](#), which is a benchmark survey of racial diversity in UK environmental organisations, only 4.5 per cent of staff across 159 participating charities and funders (employing over 28,000 people) identify as people of colour or other ethnically minoritised groups^[1]. This starkly contrasts with the 18 per cent of England and Wales's population and 16 per cent of the UK working-age population who identify as ethnically diverse. Representation at senior levels is equally poor with just 4.8 per cent of senior leaders and 10.1 per cent of trustees hailing from racially minoritised backgrounds.

Organisational size compounds inequity: large charities (500–1,000 employees) report a 1.8 per cent Global Majority workforce, compared to 14.1 per cent at smaller charities (10–49 employees). The wider charity workforce is edging forward but still behind: according to NCVO's [UK Civil Society Almanac 2024](#) (based on December 2023 data), 13 per cent of voluntary-sector staff are from Global Majority backgrounds, up from 9 per cent in December 2022; this still lags the public (15 per cent) and private (16 per cent) sectors and the 18 per cent share of the UK working-age population.

Collectively, these statistics expose a persistent diversity gap in the environmental sector: an eight-percentage-point shortfall compared to the wider charity sector and an 11–12-point gap relative to the UK labour market. Addressing this disparity is critical for if environmental organisations aim to tackle the climate crisis equitably, they must confront who wields power, whose perspectives dominate agendas and how systemic barriers exclude minoritised voices. Diversity at all levels, including leadership, trusteeship and beyond, must be treated as a critical concern.

These disparities underscore the need for carefully and thoughtfully designed interventions to dismantle structural barriers and foster equitable leadership pathways. It is against this backdrop that *Re-Imagining Leadership in the Environmental Sector*, a collaborative initiative funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and implemented by Makani Cambridge and Common Purpose, was conceived. The project seeks to investigate the challenges faced by Global Majority professionals aspiring to leadership roles in the environmental sector, while simultaneously designing a scalable, sustainable leadership programme. By centring the lived experiences of minoritised individuals and prototyping innovative and equitable solutions, we aim to contribute to bridging the representation gap, while *reimagining* how leadership is defined, accessed, practised, and sustained.

[1] In this report, we use the term [Global Majority](#) to refer to people who are racialised as Black, Asian, Brown, Arab, or Indigenous, recognising that together they constitute the majority of the world's population.

Summary of the Project

Research and Insights laid the foundations through a rapid literature scan, two practitioner focus groups (with 13 contributors) and five in-depth interviews, which brought cross-sector wisdom into view. This mixture surfaced both the structural log-jams and the sparks of possibility that would steer the rest of the work.

Concept Scoping then wove the retreat's raw materials into a draft ecosystem model, consisting of inner, middle and outer circles of development activity, and sketched a business proposition that could bring multiple organisations into a shared cohort and talent pipeline.

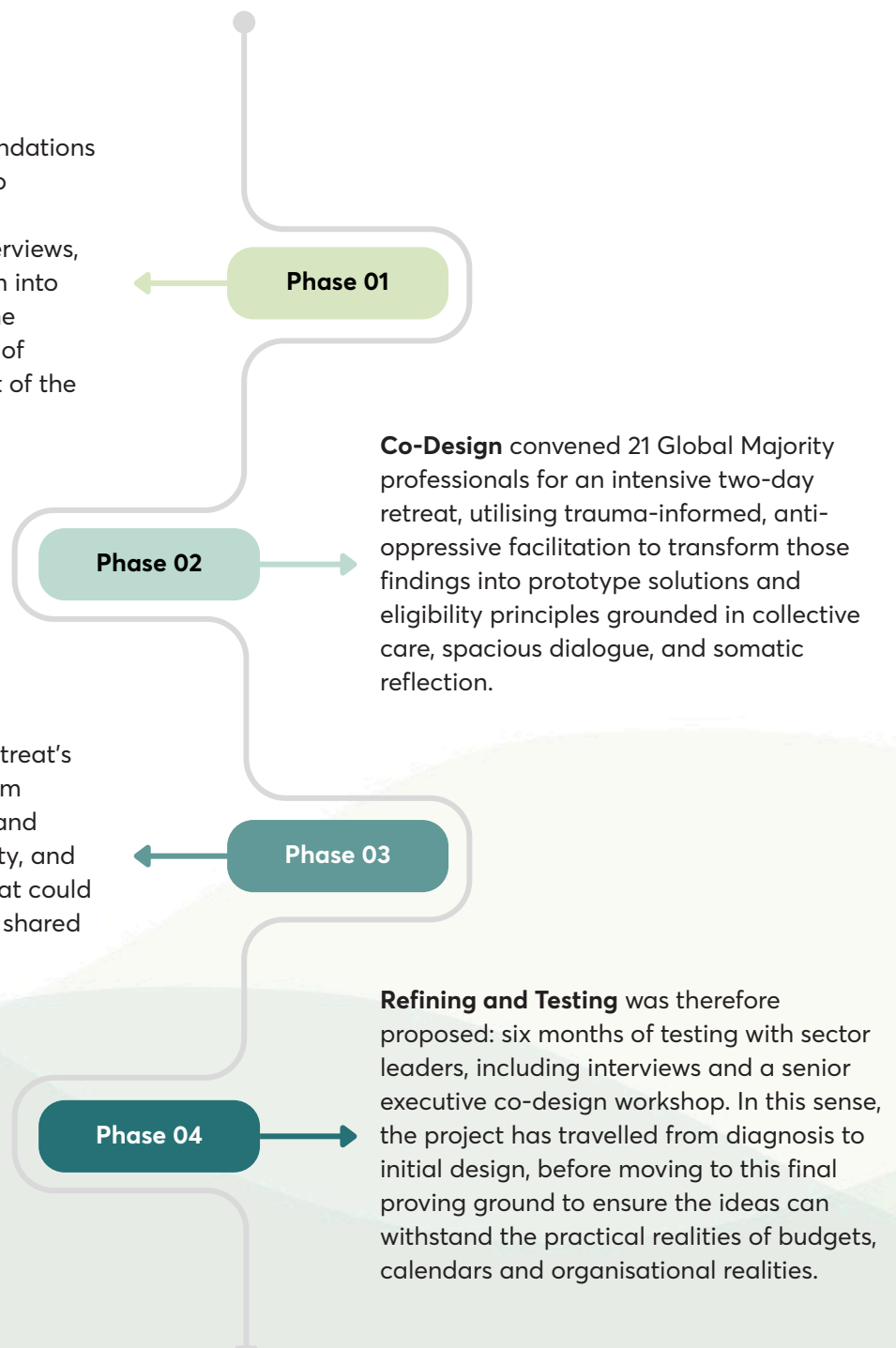


fig.1 Project Phases

Our Approach

From the outset, we treated participants not as data points but as co-authors and active collaborators. The mixed-methods first phase drew on a concise literature review to map what is already known about leadership barriers in the sector. These insights were distilled into light-touch prompts that shaped our two focus groups and five in-depth interviews, ensuring conversations were grounded in evidence while remaining open-ended. We led with questions rather than hypotheses and invited Global Majority professionals to surface the obstacles, coping strategies and ambitions that conventional theorising often overlooks.

The subsequent two-day co-design retreat deepened this participant-centred stance. Through trauma-informed and anti-oppressive facilitation, we created space for story-sharing, collective care and somatic reflection, enabling peers to test ideas against their lived realities in real time.[1] Literature never left the room; its lessons quietly framed guiding questions and provided a loose scaffold, but the agenda was steered by the cohort's own insights and priorities. Overall, rather than asking participants to fit existing models, we asked what equitable leadership could look like, and what action it would require if the system itself were reimagined.

[2] Several terms used throughout this report originate in social justice, collective liberation, and community-based leadership practice. They are included below to support shared understanding:

Trauma-informed: An approach that recognises the widespread impact of trauma and prioritises safety, choice, dignity, and agency, while actively avoiding re-traumatisation.

Somatic: An approach that centres the body as a source of knowledge, regulation, and insight, recognising that experiences of power, stress, and trauma are held and processed physically as well as cognitively.

Anti-oppressive: A practice that actively names, challenges, and redistributes power by addressing structural inequalities, rather than treating harm as individual or incidental.

Lived experience (racialisation): Expertise rooted in direct personal experience of racialisation and its impacts, recognised as a valid and essential form of knowledge alongside academic and professional expertise.



1 Co-designing Pathways for Diversity residential, 19-20 Feb 2025.

In phase three, we synthesised the learning across all research and co-design activities through a rigorous analytical process that centred participants' perspectives while situating them within wider sectoral realities. This phase balanced lived experience with considerations of feasibility, context, and possibility, allowing patterns, tensions and opportunities to emerge without diluting the integrity of Global Majority participants' accounts.

Phase four focused on testing, developing and refining the ecosystem model that emerged from this analysis. Recognising that structural change requires engagement beyond those most affected, we incorporated input from CEOs and other decision-makers. This phase was critical for strengthening the model's relevance and viability, and also for rallying support, encouraging collaboration, and building the collective buy-in necessary for sustained action.

Participant-Led Insights

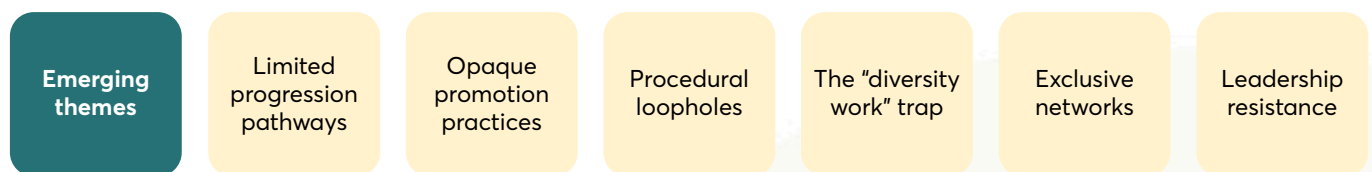
This section sets out the main insights and outcomes that emerged across the four phases of the project.

Phase One: Initial Diagnosis and Data Collection

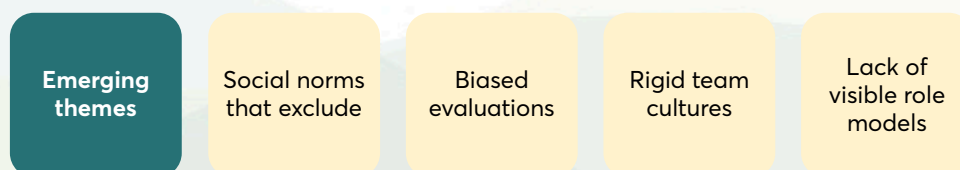
1 Insights from focus group discussions

The two focus groups laid bare a set of entrenched structural and cultural obstacles that seem to prevent people from the Global Majority progressing into senior leadership roles within the environmental sector. Participants spoke frankly about their experiences, offering both diagnoses and potential remedies.

Structural barriers



Cultural barriers



Recommendations offered by participants

1. Strengthen organisational accountability
2. Reform HR and leadership practices
3. Rethink workplace culture

These insights, grounded in the lived experiences of participants, reflect a sector where diversity efforts too often stall at the entry level, without translating into meaningful change further up the ladder. At the same time, they offer ideas for building more equitable pathways into leadership; ideas that organisations can adopt, adapt, and build upon to move beyond symbolic gestures towards lasting structural and cultural change.

2 Insights from the in-depth interviews

The in-depth interviews echoed many of the themes raised in the focus groups, while offering a deeper lens into how systemic exclusion continues to operate even within organisations that claim to prioritise diversity. Despite visible diversity initiatives, implicit bias still heavily influences hiring and promotion decisions. Senior leadership teams and boards in the environmental sector remain overwhelmingly white, reinforcing the sense that top roles are reserved for a narrow demographic. Informal networks and sponsorships continue to shape career progression behind the scenes, leaving those without the 'right' connections at a clear disadvantage. For many racialised professionals, the only space they are invited into is that of diversity work (work that is important, but often tangential to career progression and rarely recognised as leadership material).

Geography was also identified as a barrier. Many environmental organisations are based in rural or semi-rural locations, which creates an additional layer of exclusion for those from urban, diverse communities. The absence of visible role models at senior levels compounds this isolation, making it difficult for Global Majority professionals to see a long-term future for themselves in the sector. Retention is a growing concern: several participants noted that racialised staff often leave within their first year, citing cultural isolation, microaggressions, and a lack of genuine belonging. A culture of apprehension, rooted in the fear of saying the wrong thing, could sometimes prevent open dialogue about race, leaving diversity initiatives feeling performative and disconnected from day-to-day organisational life.

For change to be meaningful, interviewees stressed the need for senior leaders to take direct ownership of the diversity agenda, rather than outsourcing it to Human Resources departments. Reverse mentoring was also mentioned several times and suggested as a useful tool to expose leaders to the systemic barriers often hidden from their view. Funders and donors also have a crucial role to play. By linking financial support to concrete and measurable diversity commitments, they can help drive accountability beyond statements and into action.

Leadership programmes tailored for Global Majority professionals were seen as essential, particularly when places are ring-fenced to guarantee access. But structural reforms alone are not enough. Without parallel shifts in organisational culture, even well-designed interventions risk falling short. Social and professional events, for example, must be reimagined to include people from a range of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Ultimately, equity in the environmental sector will not be achieved through goodwill alone. It requires systemic intervention: confronting implicit bias, reshaping organisational cultures, and embedding robust accountability at every level. Without these changes, efforts at inclusion risk remaining symbolic; gestures of intent rather than instruments of transformation.

Phase Two: Re-imagining and Co-designing

This section outlines the key barriers to leadership progression identified by participants and the interventions they co-developed in response. We have sought to remain faithful to participants' language and lived experience; the perspectives presented do not constitute an endorsement or critique by Makani Cambridge or Common Purpose. Included as expressed, they reflect the current landscape as experienced by those within it and provide a grounded foundation for developing a collaborative, equity-led model to support meaningful change.

Insights from the co-design process

Co-Design Context

The Re-imagining Leadership co-design process sought to create a space for senior and emerging Global Majority leaders in the environmental sector to explore and shape more equitable and inclusive leadership models. The programme was designed to bring together a diverse cohort from different backgrounds, organisational sizes, and leadership levels within the sector.

Recruitment and Cohort Composition

To ensure a broad and representative pool of participants, recruitment was conducted through a collaborative effort involving Makani Cambridge, Common Purpose, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, and our Steering Group. This collective outreach enabled us to reach a wide range of Global Majority professionals and leaders across the environment sector.

Selection was guided by principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The criteria included:

Gender diversity

Diversity of backgrounds

Organisational size

The "diversity work" trap

Leadership level

2 participants per organisation max

We received a total of 42 applications, out of which 22 participants were initially selected. Two individuals withdrew before the programme and were replaced with applicants from the waiting list. Another participant dropped out at the last minute, resulting in a final cohort of 21 participants. Those who were not selected were offered a free mentoring session, six of whom accepted the offer and were matched with mentors from the Steering Group.

Co-Design Findings and Participants Recommendations

The process was designed over a day and a half to centre collective wisdom, spaciousness, and story-sharing, fostering an atmosphere where participants could engage in meaningful dialogue and co-creation.

The co-design process explored a set of interrelated questions, including:

1. What Is Missing in Current Leadership Development?

The participants started by highlighting the current structural gaps: lack of clear pathways, socio-economic support, and financial resources. They also discussed how the current systems are inequitable: Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) quotas without real inclusion, lack of governance and policy literacy, and highlighted the need for mentorship, allyship, confidence building, and self-empowerment. They also referred to addressing stereotypes, navigating unwritten rules, and celebrating diverse identities, as well as understanding power dynamics and fostering collective action. They mentioned peer networks, community-building, and access to inspiring stories and lived experiences.

2. What Do You Need for Thriving?



3. What Would Equitable Leadership Feel Like?

- Empowering, fulfilling, and financially secure.
- A space where diverse perspectives are valued.
- A shift from *power-over* to *power-with*: collaborative, authentic, and disrupting the status quo.
- A sense of belonging, trust, and community rather than assimilation or loneliness.

4. How can we shift Leadership from Power-Over to Power-With?

- Treating people as individuals, disrupting extraction models.
- Transparency & Accountability.
- Calling out imperialism, understanding power dynamics, sharing resources.
- Shared purpose, partnerships, and listening to all voices.

5. How Can We Insure Accountability in Leadership?

- Shift from perfectionism to growth.
- Decentralise power and encourage honest conversations.
- Remove blame culture and acknowledge systemic barriers.
- Share knowledge and involve diverse perspectives.

6. How Can We Support Emotional Wellbeing?

- Outdoor activities, wellbeing funds, access to therapists.
- Creating a culture of acknowledging achievements.
- Collective care and structured support from mentors and peers.

7. What Would the Eligibility Criteria Look Like?

The group emphasised that future leadership programmes should embody the collective wisdom and vision of their participants. They provided clear action points for designing leadership pathways that are diverse, inclusive, and transformative. Their recommendations highlighted the importance of continuing to co-create leadership models that centre equity, community, collective care, and systemic change.

Selection Criteria (Ordered by the number of votes, from highest to lowest)

Core criteria:

- Recognises intersectionality and its impact on leadership and inclusion of people from the Global Majority.
- Open to emerging leaders at different stages of their journey.
- Demonstrates a commitment to driving change and advancing social justice.
- Can articulate their career path and the barriers they have faced.
- Identifies with a Global Majority background or has lived experience of racialisation.
- Shows a genuine desire to progress and a passion for leadership.
- Can express clear expectations from the programme and its long-term benefits.

Flexible Criteria

- Demonstrates a transformative and disruptive mindset in their approach to leadership.
- Can articulate their aspirations and future goals.

Phase Three: Analytical Synthesis and Model Foundations

The third phase involved synthesising the insights from Phases 1 and 2 to develop a potential business model that could support ongoing efforts to diversify leadership in the sector in a sustainable and impactful way.

The outcomes of the co-design process were wide-ranging and revealed a richness of ideas and approaches that could not be fully contained within the structure of a conventional leadership programme. This highlighted the need for an innovative approach that adopts an ecosystem lens and reimagines leadership development more expansively and sustainably. Nevertheless, several key themes emerged from the process that will be vital to incorporate into any future programme:

- **Support networks:** A vital antidote to isolation, offering space for honest dialogue and nurturing a shared sense of purpose.
- **Visibility and access:** Greater insight is needed into how organisations operate at senior levels, alongside opportunities for visibility in influential and high-profile spaces.
- **Coaching and mentoring:** To foster confidence, deepen knowledge, and support progression.
- **Dismantling cultural barriers:** Support to manage the unwritten rules within organisations and counteract stereotyping. This is also relevant to cross-sector collaboration, which is essential for a more equitable Environment Sector.
- **Intergenerational learning:** A strong emphasis on mutual learning across generations.
- **Hybrid structure:** A flexible delivery model combining in-person and online elements over a 6–12 month period.
- **Decolonising leadership:** A commitment to fostering anti-racist, equitable leadership models and practices that challenge dominant norms and centre justice, dignity, and belonging.

Another strong and important recommendation from participants in the co-design process was that a leadership programme cannot succeed without the active support and involvement of organisations and their senior leadership. There was a clear sense that any approach lacking this level of engagement and commitment would be unlikely to create meaningful or lasting change.

Consultation with senior executives in the sector

Following the co-design process, we consulted with senior executives in major NGOs in the sector. The aim was to gauge appetite for such a leadership programme, gather insights into what would make it successful, and explore the level of senior-level commitment that could realistically be expected.

These conversations revealed strong enthusiasm for participation, particularly where the programme would bring together a cohort of organisations to share learning and responsibility. Interviewees widely recognised that the environmental sector lags behind others in addressing leadership diversity and acknowledged the very limited presence of Global Majority professionals in senior roles. There was also a clear and consistent message that any programme's success would depend on sustained senior leadership sponsorship and active organisational support.

Adopting a 'cohort' approach

The organisations we consulted were overwhelmingly positive about the idea of adopting a cohort-based approach to the programme, where a group of organisations come together to support the programme and collaborate to provide sponsorship, access and opportunities for participants. They emphasised the value of creating space for leadership development and organisational development professionals to meet, share learning, and align efforts.

This cohort model could also enable meaningful cross-organisational opportunities such as job shadowing, mentoring, placements, and secondments.

One interviewee highlighted, and others echoed, that a key factor in leadership progression is access to experiences beyond an individual's current role. While this is a common challenge across the conservation sector, it disproportionately affects people from the Global Majority, who often find themselves stuck in static roles. Lacking broader experience, they are then overlooked for promotion. As a result, many end up leaving the sector to gain the necessary experience elsewhere, only to return later.

Leadership level and sector mix

We asked the interviewees how many people from the Global Majority they have at senior levels within their organisations. All have very few and in some have none – though there are more at the middle management level. Given that these are some of the largest organisations in the sector this suggests that a leadership programme would need to accommodate both senior and middle management participants and their needs.

We also asked about the mix of sectors, and it was felt that the programme should certainly include the public sector because this would provide greater opportunities for participants to build their cross-sector skills and experience. This was seen as a key development need for the sector. It would also provide more opportunities to learn in different settings if the cohort approach was adopted and there were opportunities for placements, shadowing etc. There is already a lot of movement between the NGOs and public sector organisations so it was felt that this would make sense.

There were varying levels of enthusiasm amongst the people we spoke to for private sector involvement, but this was welcomed overall, because it would increase the opportunities for experience and learning for Global Majority leaders which in turn would help with their progression.

The involvement of the public and potentially the private sector would increase the sustainability of the programme as these sectors usually have higher budgets for leadership development than the NGO sector.

Ecosystem approach

Feedback from the co-design process, alongside consultations with senior executives from across the sector, strongly indicated that any future leadership programme must take an 'ecosystem' approach. This means involving senior executives, EDI professionals, and leadership development leads, rather than simply nominating individuals from different organisations to participate in a stand-alone initiative.

Building on this feedback, we envisaged the programme being delivered in a hybrid format (both face-to-face and online) over a 6 to 12-month period. The core elements should be completed within 6 months to maintain focus, with a proportion of the core elements delivered in person. The need for a strong sense of community and support emerged as a key recommendation during the co-design process, and offering some elements in person will provide the best opportunity to foster that supportive environment.

This flexible approach offers several key advantages:

- It accommodates both senior and mid-level leaders.
- It fosters a strong sense of community and provides a support network.
- It actively engages the wider ecosystem and encourages inter- and intra-organisational participation and senior-level sponsorship and engagement.
- It helps build a pipeline of leaders from the Global Majority.
- It leverages existing initiatives and support structures to maximise resources and avoid duplication.

Phase Four: Refining and Testing

Building on the foundational work of the first three phases, Phase 4 brought a crucial new voice to the table: the institutional senior executives. By inviting CEOs and senior decision-makers to stress-test our ecosystem-based model, we moved from theoretical co-design to practical, systemic reality testing. Throughout the 9 interviews and the co-design workshop we held in November 2025, the consensus was clear: "An isolated leadership programme won't work".

The Interviews:

We interviewed 9 senior executives from a range of organisations across the sector. These included both large and small organisations and organisations working in a range of fields such as land and water management, conservation, and food and farming.

The interviews focused on the following questions:

- What is your experience of development efforts for global majority professionals? What was successful and what were the challenges?
- What would you like to see in a leadership programme to support the development of global majority professionals?
- What practical support (if any) would you need to be part of such a programme?

All the interviewees had experience of providing development support to global majority professionals and provided invaluable practical insights into the effectiveness (or not) of different strategies. All reinforced the conclusions from the focus groups and co-design in Phase 1 that Global Majority professionals face systemic and cultural barriers to progression and many emphasised the need to tackle this challenge at different levels within organisations. Many stressed the key role that both line managers and senior managers in the success of any future programme and the importance of support for those managers to play that role effectively.

Executives from smaller organisations explained the very practical constraints caused by lack of resources both in terms of time and funds to take part in and support any future programme. Both they and the larger organisations felt that a cohort approach would be important allowing organisations to work together to pool resources, expertise and cross fertilise experience and ideas.

The Co-design Workshop:

Testing the Model:

We presented the draft "12 Month Programme" structure. The proposed model, which pairs 20 Global Majority Leaders with 20 Senior Leaders, was well-received as a robust framework for cross-pollination. The design features distinct tracks, including a 3-Day Gathering for Global Majority leaders and a Senior Track of online modules, that converge into a Combined Track.

Participants found this structure promising and expressed a strong desire to deepen the collaborative elements. There was a clear recommendation to expand the "Combined Track" by adding "more modules in the middle," creating "more shared conversations involving both tracks". Rather than keeping the cohorts separate, the group saw immense value in increasing the touchpoints between senior leaders and emerging talent to maximise mutual learning. Additionally, the inclusion of a dedicated Community of Practice for HR/EDI professionals was validated as a necessary component to support the wider ecosystem.

Emerging Themes:

In the "What is emerging?" dialogue, the focus turned to ensuring the programme delivers deep, sustainable change. The group emphasised that the "dynamic between senior + line manager will be key," suggesting that we explicitly design support mechanisms to nurture this relationship. By prioritising "psychological safety" and managing the "emotional load," the programme can create a safe container for transformation. There were also constructive discussions on how middle management can be more deeply involved to ensure the learning cascades throughout the organisation.

Finally, the "**Commitments & Feasibility Lab**" explored how to secure lasting institutional buy-in. To ensure the programme is valued as a "critical strategic priority," participants recommended rigorous entry requirements, such as a "pledge or contract," to signal the seriousness of the commitment. Innovative resourcing models were also highlighted as a major opportunity. The group proposed exploring "pooled training budgets" among organisations or including "diversity overheads" in grant bids. These solutions would help transition the initiative from a short-term project to a long-term systemic intervention capable of building a "critical mass" of 100+ participants, shifting the sector's power dynamics, and creating clearer pathways for more Global Majority professionals to move into senior leadership roles.

Natural Catalysts Programme

As a result of this research and co-design process we propose a leadership programme (working title 'Natural Catalysts'). It is envisaged as a 12-month leadership initiative structured around two parallel tracks: one for senior leaders and one for Global Majority leaders. Organisations would participate by nominating one senior leader and one Global Majority leader who would join as a 'pair'. The emphasis here is on organisational as well as individual commitments. Where an organisation does not have a Global Majority leader, it may still nominate a senior leader, but an organisation cannot send a Global Majority leader on their own without the participation of a senior leader. The programme cohort will comprise 40 participants in total.

The programme would adopt a modular, ecosystem-based approach, combining structured learning, peer exchange, and practical exposure through shadowing and visibility opportunities.

Proposed Structure - 12 Month Programme

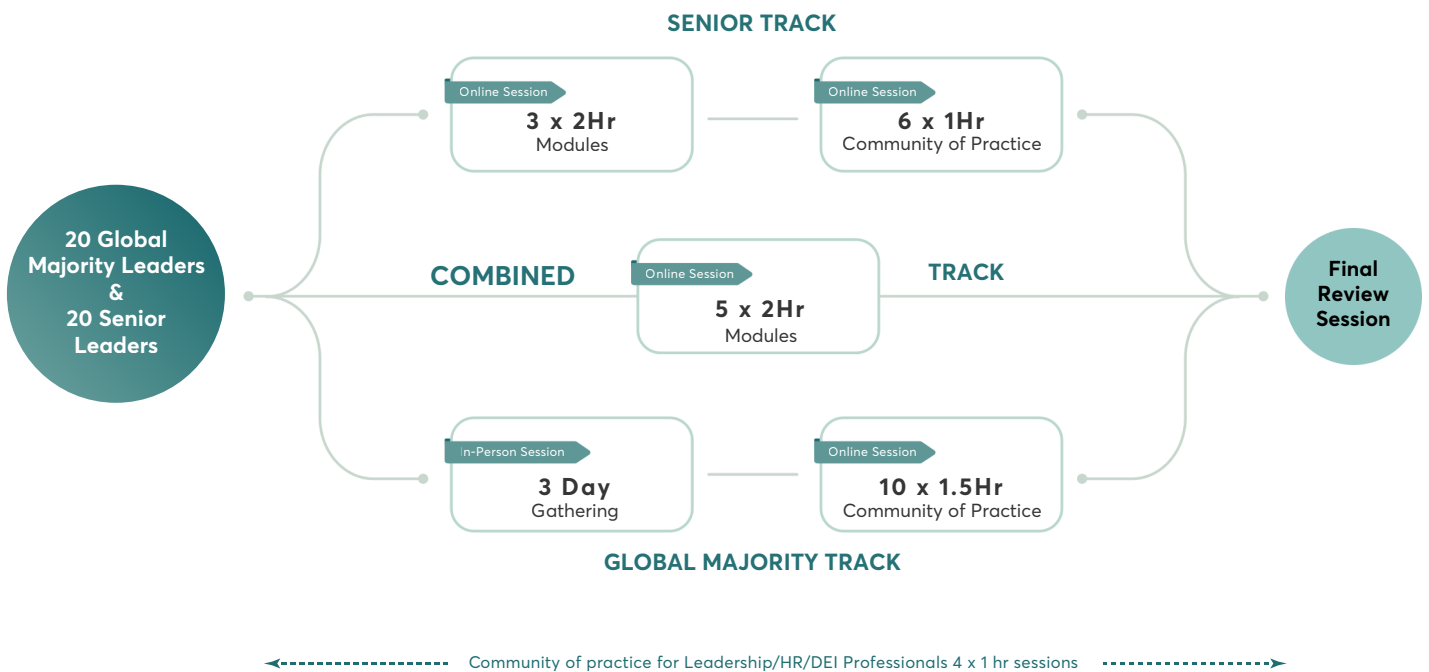


fig.2 Proposed Structure

Senior Leaders Track:

Senior leaders would take part in a series of online learning modules focused on power, leadership, and sponsorship, alongside participation in a Community of Practice. This Community of Practice will operate as a co-learning space over the year, with themes shaped collaboratively by participants.

Global Majority Leaders Track:

The Global Majority leaders track would begin with an onboarding webinar, followed by an in-person residential element. Participants would also engage in an extended Community of Practice, designed as a peer-led space for shared learning, reflection, and leadership development, with content shaped by the cohort.

Joint Learning Track:

The senior leaders and Global Majority leaders would come together through a set of joint sessions held across the year. Participants would attend a minimum number of these sessions, which will feature external contributors and explore themes such as leadership beyond authority and cultural intelligence.

Community of Practice:

Organisations would also be invited to nominate a senior HR or EDI practitioner to participate in a dedicated Community of Practice focused on shared learning and good practice. Where organisations are small, the participating senior leader may attend these sessions or nominate an alternative colleague.

Shadowing and Visibility Commitments:

Each senior leader would commit to offering one shadowing opportunity and one visibility opportunity to a Global Majority leader within the cohort, supporting access to senior spaces, networks, and decision-making forums.

Programme Close:

The programme would conclude with a collective closing event bringing both tracks together to reflect and mark completion. An optional wider-sector retreat may also be explored as an additional element, subject to resources.

Funding:

Given the financial challenges facing the sector funding will be essential to launch a pilot. Fees would need to be set at a level that organisations in the sector can afford, plus part and full bursaries would be required to remove barriers to participation by smaller organisations.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Across the co-design process and the different phases of this project, we encountered a wide range of interconnected areas requiring attention and improvement. For some, this breadth can feel overwhelming, prompting doubts about the usefulness of the outcomes. Others may respond by isolating one or two issues and prioritising them as a way of making the challenge more manageable. While understandable, these responses risk obscuring the core issue: the persistent underrepresentation of Global Majority professionals in senior leadership within the environmental sector.

In our view, the number of issues identified reflects the deeply intersectional nature of this underrepresentation. Experiences of exclusion are shaped by race, class, gender, geography, organisational culture, informal networks, and access to power and resources. Addressing any one of these in isolation may offer limited progress but is unlikely to deliver sustained or systemic change.

This understanding underpins our commitment to an ecosystem approach to diversity. Rather than relying on a single lever or linear solution, it recognises leadership representation as the product of interdependent conditions that must be addressed in parallel. Working across multiple fronts, such as leadership development, communities of practice, allyship, resourcing, and opportunities for shadowing and mentorship, creates the conditions for change to take root and endure.

Taken together, these interventions help build an enabling environment in which pathways into leadership are more visible, accessible, and sustainable for people from the Global Majority. Viewed through this holistic lens, a robust leadership programme or business model cannot be a one-off or linear intervention; it must instead function as a flexible framework for multiple, interlinked actions, engaging stakeholders across organisations and levels of seniority, and responding to their distinct contexts and needs.

Recommendations

Set out below are the main recommendations that emerged across the successive phases of research, co-design, and consultation:

1. Treat leadership diversity as a shared ecosystem responsibility, not an individual deficit

Environmental organisations should move away from stand-alone leadership programmes that focus solely on the individual from the Global Majority. Instead, leadership diversity must be understood as an ecosystem issue shaped by structures, cultures, informal networks, and power relations across organisations and funders. This requires interventions that operate simultaneously at individual, organisational, and sectoral levels, with shared ownership and accountability across the ecosystem.

2. Secure explicit, resourced senior leadership commitment

Any future leadership programme aimed at diversifying leadership must require active senior sponsorship, not passive endorsement. This means that senior leaders must make clear, formal commitments that signals organisational seriousness and follow through on those commitments. Such as:

- Offering shadowing, placements, or visibility opportunities.
- Participating in learning spaces focused on power, sponsorship, and decolonising leadership.
- Recognising diversity, EDI and community facing work as core leadership labour.

Without this level of commitment, programmes risk reproducing symbolic inclusion rather than structural change.

4. Build and resource collective support structures to counter isolation and attrition whilst promoting creativity and collaboration

Retention is as critical as progression. Organisations and funders should therefore invest in peer networks and communities of practice; intergenerational and cross-sector learning; and spaces for collective reflection and care.

These structures act as a vital antidote to isolation and cultural marginalisation and should be treated as core infrastructure rather than extras. They also promote the cross-fertilisation of ideas and collaborative working which are essential for effective environmental action.

3. Redesign leadership development to centre power, sponsorship, and lived experience

Leadership development content should move beyond skills and confidence-building alone. Core learning must explicitly address:

- How power operates within organisations and across the sector and how racism, class, geography, and organisational culture shape leadership pathways.
- How sponsorship differs from mentoring and how it can be practiced ethically and well.
- Programmes should be grounded in lived experience and designed with, not for, Global Majority leaders, using trauma-informed and anti-oppressive approaches that acknowledge emotional labour and systemic harm.

5. Create real access to experience, visibility, and decision-making spaces

Progression into senior leadership is shaped less by formal criteria and more by access to experience, networks, and exposure. The sector should expand cross-organisational placements, secondments, and shadowing, and increase board and executive visibility opportunities for Global Majority leaders. Importantly, access to experience must be intentionally designed and properly supported by senior leadership.

6. Reform organisational cultures, not just policies HR reforms alone will not deliver equity.

Organisations must also address the cultural conditions that shape who belongs and who progresses, including: Unwritten rules and informal norms; social and professional practices that privilege certain identities or lifestyles; and fear-based cultures that inhibit honest conversations about race and power.

7. Adopt a cohort-based, cross-sector model to build critical mass

The evidence strongly supports a cohort approach that brings together multiple organisations across the NGO, public, and where appropriate, private sectors. This model:

- Enables shared learning and accountability.
- Expands opportunities for placements and sponsorship.
- Builds a pipeline of Global Majority leaders across the ecosystem.

Over time, scaling such an approach can help build a critical mass of leaders capable of shifting norms, expectations, and power dynamics across the sector. It will also help to create the enabling environment for Global Majority leaders to progress into senior roles.

8. Embed wellbeing, collective care, and sustainability into leadership pathways

Leadership development should not come at the cost of wellbeing. Sustainable leadership requires sustainable people. Programmes and organisations must acknowledge emotional load and racialised labour by:

- Normalising support for mental and emotional wellbeing.
- Creating space for reflection, rest, and collective care.
- Valuing joy, connection, and creativity as leadership resources rather than distractions.

In closing, and following this attempt to reimagine more equitable leadership within the environmental sector, it is important to acknowledge the wider context in which this work sits. The sector faces multiple internal and external pressures, and in such conditions leadership development can easily slip down organisational agendas. Yet diversifying leadership is not a peripheral concern; it is essential if the sector is to reflect the communities it serves and to respond credibly to the social and environmental challenges it seeks to address.

Funders have a critical role to play in shifting sector norms by linking funding to concrete, measurable commitments on leadership diversity, supporting pooled budgets and shared investment across organisations, and by allowing diversity and leadership development costs to be built into core funding rather than treated as overheads. In doing so, funders can act as partners in moving the sector from isolated pilot projects towards sustained systemic change.

We realise that the changes we propose will take time and require ongoing testing and learning. We think that organisations should resist the temptation to treat any programme or model as a finished solution. Equity-led leadership development must remain iterative, responsive, and grounded in lived experience. This means committing to continuous learning, adaptation and co-design with Global Majority leaders, alongside a willingness to revisit assumptions and adjust structures as contexts evolve.

**On behalf of Makani Cambridge,
Common Purpose, and Esmée
Fairbairn Foundation we would like to
extend our thanks and deep
appreciation to everyone who gave up
their time to share their expertise,
experience, and ideas with us. Your
insights, openness and generosity were
invaluable.**