

# Re-imagining Leadership in the Environmental Sector

Co-Designing Pathways to Diversity

January 2026



# Project Overview

The *Re-imagining Leadership in the Environmental Sector* initiative, led by Makani Cambridge in partnership with Common Purpose and funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, seeks to tackle one of the UK's most persistent equity challenges: the under-representation of people from the Global Majority in senior leadership across the environmental sector.

Despite growing awareness, the latest RACE Report (2024) reveals that only 4.5 percent of staff in UK environmental charities identify as Global Majority, compared with 18 percent of the working-age population. This significant gap persists at senior levels, with fewer than 5 per cent of executives coming from racially minoritised backgrounds. Addressing this inequity is a moral imperative and a strategic necessity for a sector seeking to deliver climate justice and sustainability for all communities.

It is against this backdrop that Makani Cambridge and Common Purpose delivered this multi-phase consultancy to examine the barriers preventing progression, co-design practical pathways and processes with those most affected, and develop a viable, scalable business model that enables Global Majority professionals to reach and thrive in leadership roles.

# What We Have Done (Phases 1–4)

## Phase 1: Research & Insights

We began with a literature review, two practitioner focus groups, and five in-depth interviews bringing together eighteen contributors from across the environmental and allied sectors.

Key findings identified structural barriers, including limited progression pathways, opaque promotion practices, bias in HR procedures, and exclusion from influential networks, as well as cultural obstacles such as microaggressions, exclusive social norms, and the absence of visible role models.

Participants noted that diversity work can itself become a structural trap, whereby Global Majority staff are over-relied upon for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives while being marginalised from progression and executive decision-making. Interviews confirmed that, without explicit senior-level commitment and accountability, change remains short-lived and superficial. They also revealed that many professionals leave the sector early due to cultural isolation and a lack of belonging.

## Phase 2: Co-Design with Global Majority Professionals

Building on insights gathered during the initial phase of research and data collection, a two-day residential co-design retreat brought together 21 senior and emerging leaders from across the sector, all of whom identified as being from the Global Majority.

Through a trauma-informed, anti-oppressive process centred on collective care, participants re-imagined what equitable leadership could look like and generated prototype solutions around:

- Capacity building through mentoring, allyship, and policy literacy, alongside greater visibility and access to senior decision-making spaces.
- Dismantling cultural barriers, including navigating unwritten rules, challenging bias, and valuing diverse identities.
- Support networks such as peer mentoring, safe spaces, and inter-generational learning.
- Decolonising leadership and shifting from “power-over” to “power-with”.

Several draft programme formats emerged, each advocating a hybrid model blending online and in-person learning over 6–12 months and embedding wellbeing, community, and justice at their core. Crucially, participants also emphasised that without the genuine buy-in and sustained support of senior leadership within organisations, any leadership programme would not be able to achieve meaningful or lasting change. This insight directly shaped the focus of Phase 4, which was dedicated to engaging senior leaders and funders to ensure their commitment, accountability, and active participation in building the ecosystem required for equitable leadership.

## Phase 3: From Ideas to a Model

Insights from the co-design phase were synthesised into an emerging ecosystem approach to leadership development. This approach recognises that underrepresentation in leadership is produced by interlocking structural, cultural, and relational factors, and therefore requires interventions that operate simultaneously at individual, organisational, and sectoral levels. It positions leadership development as a shared responsibility across the environmental sector, one that is sustained through relationships, accountability, and collective action.

Within this ecosystem approach, leadership development is supported through interconnected layers of activity that respond to different needs, roles, and points of influence. These include core developmental work focused on power, decolonising leadership, sponsorship, cultural intelligence, anti-racist practice, and peer coaching; flexible and optional modules tailored to areas such as collaboration, governance, wellbeing, and public speaking; and wider organisational engagement through cross-sector placements, shadowing, allyship sessions, and an annual retreat designed to foster shared learning and collective accountability.

Consultations with senior executives from major organisations in the sector confirmed strong appetite for the adopted cohort-based, cross-organisational approach. They emphasised that meaningful progress requires active sponsorship from senior leadership and collective participation across the environmental sector, including EDI and HR professionals, funders, and executives, rather than an exclusive focus on individual leadership development.

## Phase 4: Refining and Testing

Phase 4 represents the transition from concept to testing and feasibility. It focused on engaging with senior executives to refine, resource, and test and explore how the framework holds under real conditions. Phase 4 therefore operated as a six-month development and co-design phase, including 9 exploratory interviews with senior executives and professionals across a broad range of organisations to gather insights, share learning, and test senior-level commitment to a potential programme. The final phase also included a one-day in-person workshop in which 15 representatives from across the sector collaborated to test emerging components of the proposed business model.

The key learnings from this final phase of the project are that:

- There is a strong appetite for a leadership programme to support the development of Global Majority leaders in the sector. However, there was a clear and consistent view that such a programme must actively involve senior managers and executives, particularly those working in EDI and leadership development, to be effective.
- The sector is made up of organisations of very different sizes and with widely varying levels of resources. As a result, a cohort-based approach that pools ideas, resources, and experience across organisations will be essential. There was considerable enthusiasm among consultees for this collaborative model.
- The 'ecosystem approach' to leadership development, as outlined during the co-design workshop in November, was broadly welcomed by participants and seen as a credible and appropriate response to the complexity of the challenge.

# Recommendations for any future leadership programme

We recommend that any future leadership programme adopts an ecosystem approach, recognising that the under-representation of Global Majority professionals in the environmental sector is multifaceted and deeply intersectional. Addressing this challenge requires interventions that operate at individual, organisational, and sectoral levels simultaneously. In practical terms, this would involve:

- Adopting a cohort-based approach in which senior leaders and Global Majority professionals apply together. This frames participation as an organisational commitment rather than an individual one. Flexibility will be required for smaller organisations that may not be able to release two participants concurrently.
- Bringing senior leaders and Global Majority leaders into the same overall cohort, with parallel development tracks that respond to their distinct roles and needs, alongside a shared 'combined track' that enables joint learning, dialogue, and relationship-building.
- Establishing a community of practice for leadership development and EDI professionals from participating organisations, providing structured space to share learning, reflect on practice, and align approaches as the programme progresses.
- Ensuring affordability through a tiered fee structure, with costs set at a level that organisations across the sector can realistically meet. To enable participation from smaller organisations, external funding will be required to support a pilot phase and to offer bursary and part-bursary places in the early years.

This ecosystem approach would create the conditions for meaningful cross-sector and cross-organisational collaboration, including work shadowing, secondments, and other development opportunities for Global Majority leaders. By accounting for some of the most pressing systemic and cultural barriers, it aims to foster an enabling environment in which Global Majority professionals can progress into, and thrive within, senior roles across the sector.

**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.**

