

## An Analysis of Leadership Development Programs Working in the Context of Development

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This paper reviews leadership development programmes<sup>1</sup> as a tool for development policy. We argue that donor and recipient organisations need to be much more critical when choosing or designing programmes; that most programmes fall short if their aim is to contribute to development; and that understanding the ‘political’ nature of leadership is key to choosing or designing a good programme.

### Methodology and Overview of the Argument

The main body of the paper consists of a review of 67 leadership development programmes (LDPs) that aim to build or enhance leadership capacity in the developing world. It primarily reviews LDPs with an online presence. These were identified and reviewed using a variety of means, including: online search and selection, scans of academic material, information from evaluation units of major development organisations, questionnaires to all surveyed LDPs providing contact information on their websites, and some semi-structured interviews. Despite constraints (such as limiting the review to organisations with some online presence, or those that responded to enquiries), this sample provides a useful basis for identifying the most important issues and themes for policy makers to take into account with regard to funding, selecting or creating leadership development programmes.

To review the programmes we asked five questions:

- Does the programme have a theory of change?
- Who is the programme aimed at?
- What are the programme’s training methods and contents?
- What kind of impact assessments or evaluations does the programme carry out?

The review is followed by a summary of the Developmental Leadership Program’s (DLP) view that leadership for *development* is more than leadership for *organisational development*, and thus requires different kinds of programme.

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) argues that leadership is ‘political’ in nature, especially in developmental contexts. As such, leadership, in addition to individual skills, is a process that involves the fostering and use of networks and the formation of coalitions as a means of overcoming the many collective action problems that define the challenges of development.

Programmes based on ‘Western’ organisational leadership training models tend to focus on the individual attributes of alleged ‘good’ leaders and presuppose the existence of robust institutions in the context in which participants work. These programmes tend to overlook the importance of the ‘political’ and ‘shared’ nature of leadership, particularly in contexts where institutions are weak or absent.

Effective ‘leadership for development’ programmes should include giving participants the understanding, tools and experience to foster networks,

form coalitions and work politically in a positive sense.

## Key findings

We have grouped the key findings of the review according to the five questions asked:

### Does the programme have a clearly articulated understanding of what it means by 'leadership'?

- **Same words, different meanings:** Leadership programmes use the same language and words, such as 'leadership', but the terms can mean very different things from one programme to another. In addition, their aims, target audiences, teaching methods and contents vary greatly. In order to be able to compare and choose between different programmes, it would be helpful if they were explicit about their definitions of leadership.
- **Most programmes do not define leadership:** Only 9 out of the 67 programmes reviewed clearly articulate their understanding of leadership.
- **Leadership as individual attribute rather than shared process:** When analysing the programmes more closely and looking at their teaching methods and content, it becomes clear that most programmes implicitly define 'leadership' as an individual trait or quality rather than as shared process between leaders and others.
- **Leadership for organisational development, rather than leadership for development:** Most LDPs are based on 'western' organisational leadership models, originally developed in the context of company management to increase efficiency and performance, rather than oriented towards leadership for institutional formation and for development.
- **Growing acknowledgement of leadership as a process.** Although very few programmes look at leadership as a 'political' process, there is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of working 'politically', forming networks and shaping coalitions in order to achieve positive outcomes.

### Does the programme have a theory of change?

A theory of change should show how the programme will lead to changes in the behaviour of participants and how these changes in turn will contribute to development. The theory of change should underpin and guide the programme's methods and contents and enable the programme to evaluate its effectiveness.

Only 10 out of 67 programmes reviewed have some sort of theory of change. Of those, most do not adequately explain the processes through which leadership is developed, and how this leadership then creates change. In general, among the LDPs reviewed, there is a disconnection between a programme's development goals and its actual practices. However, the review identified four programmes that did provide strong, research-based and fully explained theories of change that trace their impact through the processes of development and change: Oxfam International Youth Partnerships (OIYP), Vital Voices, Project on Leadership and Building State Capacity, and the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) Leadership for Results.

### Who is the programme aimed at?

There is a considerable variety of LDPs and of types of participant aimed at. There is also much variety and the types of participant aimed at for such programmes. These include: existing leaders, potential leaders, high-level leaders, grass-roots leaders, women leaders, or leaders connected to a specific sector or issue (such as agriculture, climate change or civil rights). There is no hard and fast rule about which kinds of participant such programmes should be aimed at. The key is to look for the programme that best matches the needs of the participants identified, or to identify the most promising programme for the development issue at hand, and then select the right participants.

One interesting finding is that, compared with LDPs in general, those programmes which are aimed at women's leadership show greater understanding of leadership as political process, are more often based around concrete objectives, and work together more frequently as a movement.

### What are the programme's training methods and contents?

Once again, a wide variety of methods, content and practices are used to develop leadership. These

vary from traditional classroom-based teaching to action-learning and from individual competency-based training to supporting entrepreneurship for development. Most programmes use a combination of training methods and content.

Overall, there is a strong tendency to base methods and content on 'Western' organisational leadership training models, which often overlook the importance of learning about networks and coalitions and are universalist rather than specific to the context of the participants. More than half (52%) of the programmes reviewed are based in Northern Europe or North America.

### What kind of impact assessments or evaluations does the programme carry out?

The LDPs that were selected for review all assert the aim of contributing to development. Accordingly, one might reasonably expect such programmes to evaluate not only participant satisfaction, but also any wider impact on the participants' organisation or on society.

The majority of programmes reviewed here, however, only evaluate at the individual level. Most of those only provide anecdotal evidence of participant satisfaction. As such, they have no way of knowing whether they contribute in any way to development. However, a few programmes do track change at the individual and organisational levels (examples are Centre for Creative Leadership, Technoserve and Avina), or even at the societal level (Chevening Scholarship Programme, Institute for Sustainable Communities and Ashoka), showing that it is possible and, we argue, important to do more.

## Policy messages

When deciding whether to support, fund or design leadership development programmes, donors and funders need to consider the following policy messages.

- **Make sure to articulate your own understanding of 'leadership' and its role for development first. What do you mean by 'leadership', why do you want to support it and to what end?**
- **Be critical and discriminating when supporting or commissioning programmes.** Ask:
  1. What is the definition of leadership used by the programme?

2. What is the theory of change of the programme?
3. For whom is this programme intended?
4. What methods, contents and practices are likely to be consistent with the theory of change?
5. How effective is the programme and how is this measured?

- **Choose programmes that understand that leadership for development is more than leadership for organisational development.** Leadership programmes oriented to development should have an understanding of the 'political' nature of leadership and should train in the use of networks, the formation of coalitions and how to work politically in a positive sense.
- **Choose programmes that are appropriate for the context and sector.** Considering the importance we attach to facilitating the use of networks and formation of coalitions, context and sector specific programmes may be more appropriate than generic ones.
- **Make sure you have the right participants.** As described in the review, there is an enormous range of programmes and approaches to choose from. Make sure you select the right participants, or the right programme for the people you have in mind.
- **More can and should be done to evaluate the effectiveness of leadership programmes.** A small number of programmes show it is possible to evaluate beyond the satisfaction at the individual participant level. Evaluations should be required to be carried out over time, at least at the individual and organisational level, and, where possible, at the societal level, to assess the appropriateness of LDPs as a tool for development policy.

## Conclusion

With important and encouraging exceptions, many leadership programmes fail to have a clearly articulated understanding of 'leadership', and few have a theory of change that could underpin and guide the methods and content of their courses. A strong tendency to base programmes on 'western' organisational leadership training models and methods is common, as is the failure to emphasise the inescapably 'political' nature of leadership in

all, but especially in developmental, contexts. By focusing largely on the alleged individual attributes of 'good' leaders, such programmes often overlook the importance of leadership as a process. This process involves the fostering and use of networks and the formation of coalitions as a means of overcoming the many collective action problems that define the challenges of development. There is a need to evaluate leadership programmes beyond participant satisfaction to verify leadership development as a policy tool for development. A minority of programmes shows that it is possible to evaluate much more than is currently the case.

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Download the full paper:

[Heather Lyne deVer & Fraser Kennedy \(2011\) "An Analysis of Leadership Development Programmes Working in the Context of Development," The Developmental Leadership Program Research Paper 11.](#)

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