CanWaCH

Global Health and Gender Equality Trends in the Leadership Landscape

BRIEFING PAPER

Introduction: Making Sense of a Shifting Landscape

Organizations working in global health and gender equality are operating in an environment shaped by sustained disruption rather than episodic change. Geopolitical fragmentation, climate-related shocks, funding instability, technological acceleration and political backlash are no longer external risks that can be anticipated and absorbed; they have become defining conditions of work. In this context, many familiar leadership and management tools such as linear planning, prediction, optimization and control are proving increasingly insufficient.

The challenge is not only that the environment is more uncertain, but that the *nature of the problems organizations are being asked to navigate have shifted*. Research across planning, leadership and complexity theory emphasizes that effectiveness depends in part on accurately diagnosing what kind of problem is being faced. When different kinds of problems are approached in the same way, organizations often respond with tools that feel reassuring but fail to address what is actually at stake.

A widely used distinction differentiates between tame, complicated and wicked problems.[1] These categories are not fixed, but they help explain why the same leadership approach can succeed in one situation and struggle in another.

Tame problems are those where both the problem definition and the solution are broadly agreed. They can be addressed through established procedures, technical fixes and standardized practices. While they may be demanding, they respond well to clarity, rules and consistency.

Complicated problems involve multiple interacting variables and require specialized expertise, coordination or analysis. They may be difficult and resource-intensive, but they remain largely solvable through planning, expert judgment and structured decision-making.

Wicked problems are fundamentally different in kind. They are characterized by contested definitions, multiple stakeholders with divergent values, shifting conditions, and no definitive or final solution. Interventions do not resolve wicked problems once and for all; they reshape the problem itself, often producing new dynamics and unintended consequences. Progress is iterative, provisional and highly dependent on context, relationships and judgment rather than technical certainty.

Many of the most consequential challenges facing global health and gender equality organizations, such as power redistribution and localization, political backlash against gender equality, trust and legitimacy, and climate-health interdependencies, display the hallmarks of wicked problems. They are deeply entangled with power, values and

1 Rittel & Webber, 1973; Grint, 2005; Snowden & Boone, 2007

uncertainty, and cannot be addressed through technical fixes or linear planning alone.

When wicked challenges are treated as if they were merely tame or complicated, organizations often respond by increasing rules, oversight and reporting with partners and staff, even when conditions would better respond to flexibility, learning and discretion. These responses can create an appearance of control, but they frequently constrain agency, slow learning and weaken trust between leaders and staff. Leaders are left managing tension rather than resolving it, while operating within systems that continue to reward certainty and compliance.

In the international cooperation space, leaders are grappling with two distinct but related challenges: wicked problems and enduring paradoxes. As defined above, wicked problems are complex, evolving challenges that resist clear definition or definitive solutions. Paradoxes, by contrast, involve persistent tensions between goals that are interdependent yet pull in different directions.[2]

In the global health and gender equality space, leaders are routinely required to pursue goals that are interdependent yet at odds: advancing localization while meeting donor compliance requirements, or giving up traditional control and central authority while redefining the organization's value and legitimacy in new roles; applying standardized approaches in support of efficiency while remaining responsive to diverse local contexts; innovating while managing risk and legitimacy. These tensions are not temporary dilemmas to be resolved through better planning. They are enduring features of work conducted across contested systems.

Recognizing the presence of wicked problems and paradoxes does not make leadership easier. It does, however, shift expectations about what effective leadership looks like. Rather than seeking certainty or closure, leaders are required to exercise judgment, convene diverse perspectives, hold conflicting ideas or opinions and sustain legitimacy while navigating unresolved tensions over time, and without rushing to judge or resolve problems.

How to read this document

This report connects today's sector trends to the kinds of problems organizations are facing, and what those conditions demand of leadership in global health and gender equality organizations. In Section 2 of this briefing, the current landscape is examined through the lens of macro-level and sector-specific challenges, highlighting how they overlap to produce complex and often wicked conditions for global health and gender equality organizations. A full inventory of trends is provided in Annex A. Section 3 explores what these conditions demand of leadership in practice, drawing on a literature review and signals from non-profit leaders, introducing a leadership capacities framework designed for these conditions (Annex B). The final section translates these insights into concrete recommendations for leaders, organizations and funders.

2 Smith, W.K. & Lewis, M.W., 2011

The Landscape of Disruption: Macro and Sector-Specific Challenges

Macro-level conditions shaping the landscape

The prevalence of wicked and paradoxical challenges is not driven by any single trend, but by the interaction of multiple macro-level forces operating simultaneously across political, economic, technological, social and environmental domains. Global health and gender equality organizations are navigating geopolitical volatility and shifts in global governance, accelerating climate crises and planetary health stressors, funding precarity, rapid technological change and shrinking civic space. Individually, many of these forces might be addressed as complicated challenges. Taken together, they create conditions of uncertainty, competing priorities and tightly linked effects that make linear planning difficult.

For global health and gender equality organizations, whose work sits at the intersection of health systems, social norms and rights-based change, these macro trends interact in particularly acute ways. For example, climate shocks intensify health system strain, disrupt care continuity, and deepen gendered inequalities as women and girls absorb increased caregiving burdens and face heightened risks to health and livelihoods. Geopolitical fragmentation reshapes aid flows and multilateral cooperation, increasing uncertainty for long-term global health and gender equality investments. Technological acceleration introduces new risks related to surveillance, bias and trust, with disproportionate impacts on women and gender-diverse populations through digital harassment, reproductive data monitoring and exclusion from data-driven systems.

At the same time, shrinking civic space constrains advocacy and rights-based work while increasing pressure on organizations to demonstrate measurable results within narrowing political and operational margins. These forces do not operate independently; they compound and reinforce one another, amplifying instability rather than stabilizing the system. As a result, leaders are not simply managing multiple risks, but navigating an operating environment shaped by overlapping pressures, contested legitimacy and limited points of control.

A full inventory of **macro-level and sector-specific trends**, including problem-type classifications, is provided in **Annex A**. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the kinds of converging challenges leaders encounter in practice.

Figure 1: Converging macro-level forces shaping wicked conditions

Broader Conditions Driving Complexity

Multiple forces combine and interact to create a complex and uncertain landscape.

POLITICAL
- Geopolitical volatility
- Nationalism
- Shrinking civic space
- Government shifts

ECONOMIC
- Funding precarity
- New philanthropic models
- Value-for-money pressures
- Migration

SOCIAL
- Demographic shifts
- Crises of belonging
- Workforce burnout
- Anti-gender backlash

TECHNOLOGICAL
- AI and data governance
- Digital surveillance risks

ENVIRONMENTAL
- Climate crises
- Planetary health
- Health system stressors

Sector-specific challenge clusters in global health and gender equality

While macro-level forces create the conditions for complexity, sector-specific dynamics in global health and gender equality often intensify wickedness rather than mitigate it. These sectors operate at the intersection of deeply political issues such as inequality, gender norms and resource distribution, where power is unevenly distributed and problem definitions are contested.

Power and localization sit at the center of this landscape. Commitments to localization and locally-led development call for shifting power, resources and decision-making authority to local and national actors. Yet donor systems and intermediary structures remain largely organized around upward accountability and top-down mechanisms, standardized reporting and risk mitigation. Leaders are required to advance power redistribution within institutional architectures not designed to support it, often eroding trust either with local partners or with funders. Rather than being transitional, this tension is embedded in existing systems and continues to shape leadership practice across the sector. At a deeper level, this reflects a broader transition paradox for the sector: how international actors let go of certain forms of control and centrality while simultaneously redefining their value, legitimacy and contribution within a changing ecosystem.

Rights-based work and political backlash represent a second defining cluster. Global health and gender equality initiatives increasingly operate amid organized resistance to gender equality, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and human rights norms, alongside shrinking civic space and rising authoritarianism. At the same time, gender equality is being deprioritized within some donor government agendas, reframed as secondary to geopolitical, security or domestic political concerns. Leaders are therefore required to sustain principled commitments while navigating reduced political support, constrained funding environments and heightened operational risk. These conditions generate enduring tensions between visibility and safety, advocacy and access, maintaining a clear, values-based position on gender equality and human rights while navigating political and operational constraints, and between long-term movement-building and organizational survival.

Other sectoral challenges layer onto these dynamics. **Financing and accountability** pressures, such as short funding cycles, value-for-money demands and results-based frameworks, often collide with the long-horizon, relational nature of systems change, while simultaneously forcing organizations to prioritize short-term viability over long-term sustainability. **Innovation and risk** agendas encourage experimentation with digital health, artificial intelligence and new financing mechanisms, even as funding structures, compliance regimes and reputational concerns penalize failure**. Pace, burnout and care** reflect the cumulative impact of sustained crisis conditions, compressing decision timelines, and intensifying the emotional and relational labour required of leaders and teams.

Together, these dynamics illuminate a widening gap between the complexity of the challenges global health and gender equality organizations face and the leadership systems currently in place to address them. Despite challenges becoming more wicked and more contested, leaders are often only equipped with tools optimized for technical coordination rather than adaptive judgment, relational work and ethical navigation. The following section examines what this gap means for leadership in practice.

What This Means for Leadership: From Role to Capacity

The landscape described in Section 2 has implications for how leadership is understood and practiced in global health and gender equality organizations. As challenges become more volatile and complex, leadership effectiveness depends less on individual expertise or positional authority and more on the capacity of people and systems to make sense of what is happening, manage tension and adapt over time.

This does not diminish the importance of senior leaders. In complex and volatile contexts, these roles become more, not less, critical, but changed in nature. Senior leaders are uniquely positioned to shape the conditions for effective leadership across the system: setting direction without over-specifying solutions, legitimizing learning and adaptation, allocating resources to experimentation, and protecting space for honest dialogue and dissent.

At the same time, leadership is exercised throughout the organization. Staff at different levels, across functions, partnerships and external-facing roles, contribute essential sensemaking, maintain proximity to context and communities, and translate strategy into action in real time. Leadership capacity therefore depends not only on the capabilities of individuals at the top, but on how well organizations enable judgment, learning and coordination across roles and relationships. In this sense, leadership is best understood as a system of roles, relationships and practices, shaped by senior leaders, enacted across levels, and sustained through collective sensemaking and adaptation.

Many prevailing leadership models and management approaches in international cooperation, shaped by classical management thinking, performance planning and results-based management, remain grounded in assumptions of stability, clarity of goals and controllable variables. They emphasize individual competence, role clarity and technical mastery — approaches that are well suited to tame and complicated problems, but poorly aligned with wicked ones. In practice, leaders are increasingly required to make decisions with incomplete information, navigate competing accountabilities and sustain legitimacy across diverse actors without the benefit of clear authority or definitive solutions.

This creates a shift from **competence to capacity**. Competence refers to what an individual leader knows or can do.[3] Capacity refers to *the collective's ability* to make sense of emerging conditions, exercise judgment under uncertainty and coordinate action across boundaries[4]. In complex systems, leadership does not reside solely in a role or a person; it emerges through interaction, in how people frame problems together, negotiate power and difference, and adjust course as conditions evolve.

Key informant interviews (KIIs)with sector leaders[5] underscore this gap between what leaders are being asked to do and what leadership systems are designed to support. Leaders consistently describe absorbing tensions between localization commitments and donor accountability, between principled positions and political backlash, and between urgency and care, often without structured spaces for reflection, peer support or shared sensemaking. As one leader noted, *"I provide support to my team, but there is very little structured support for leaders at my level who are holding proximity to communities while navigating global organizational pressures." Another reflected that much of their role now involves "helping people make sense of why priorities keep shifting, so we can keep moving without pretending things are simpler than they are."*

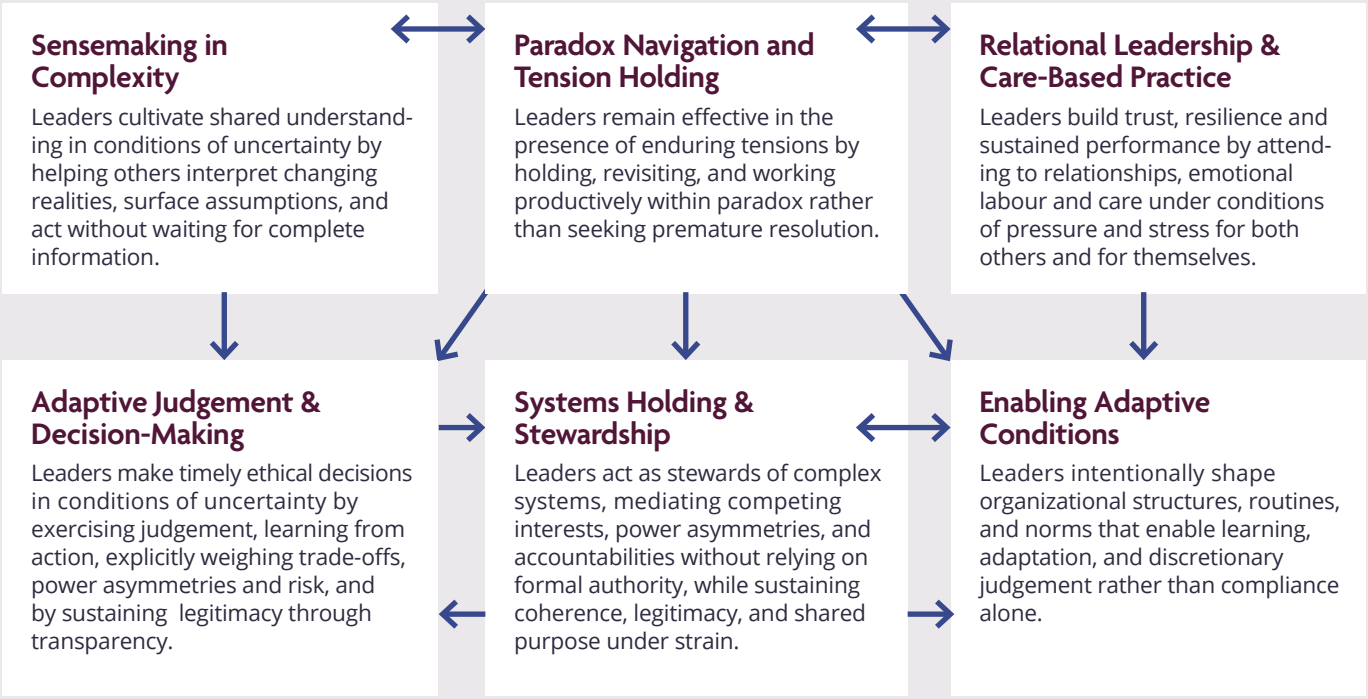
These experiences point to a leadership gap that cannot be addressed through skill-building or training alone. What is required is a redefinition of the capacities that leadership systems must cultivate, legitimize and reinforce to remain effective in conditions of ongoing uncertainty.

3 Boyatzis, 1982.
4 Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Weick et al., 2005
5 During the research period, leaders in the global health and gender equality sector participated in Key Informant Interviews. Interviewees represented a diverse set of backgrounds including gender, race, geography and position.

Core Leadership Capacities for Wicked and Paradoxical Contexts

Drawing on the literature and KIIs with leaders, this report advances a **Leadership Competencies Framework** designed explicitly for contexts characterized by wicked problems, enduring paradox and power asymmetries. The framework identifies six interdependent leadership capacities that enable leaders and organizations to function effectively when certainty is unavailable and trade-offs cannot be resolved. **Figure 2** provides a synthesized version of the full Framework, found in **Annex B**.

Figure 2: Leadership Competencies Framework — Synthesis



These capacities are systemic rather than individual. They do not describe heroic leadership traits or idealized behaviours, but the conditions and practices that allow judgment, learning and coordination to emerge across an organization or network. Because wicked challenges are shaped by relationships, values and power, these capacities must be cultivated collectively, through governance arrangements, routines, incentives and norms that support adaptation rather than compliance alone.

The absence of these capacities helps explain why the sector-wider trends and wicked dynamics described earlier in the report continue to produce persistent strain, trade-offs and unintended consequences. When sensemaking is weak, organizations default to oversimplification. When paradox cannot be held, leaders are pressured toward either-or choices. When relational and care-based work is undervalued, burnout and erosion of trust follow. Systems that emphasize control can make it harder to learn and adapt when conditions are changing quickly. The framework provides a practical map for strengthening leadership capacity in response to these dynamics, including observable behaviours and enabling practices.

Recommendations: Cultivating Leadership Capacity in Practice

The leadership capacities outlined in Section 4 and Annex B cannot be developed through training or individual effort alone. Research on complexity, adaptive leadership and systems change consistently shows that leadership effectiveness in uncertain and contested environments depends on how work is structured, how decisions are made and what behaviors are rewarded.[6] The recommendations below focus on concrete shifts in practice, organizational design and sector-wide incentives that would better align leadership systems with the realities described in this report.

Because leadership capacity is shaped by systems as much as by individuals, the recommendations below address shifts in practice at the level of leaders, organizations and the wider ecosystem.

Implications for leaders: Shifts in practice

For leaders operating in complex and volatile contexts, effectiveness depends less on providing answers and more on shaping the conditions for sound judgment and collective action. Leaders should prioritize **sensemaking over solution delivery**, treating the framing of problems as core leadership work. What this could look like in complex contexts, is that leaders add value not by having better answers, but by enabling the organization to ask better questions, interpret signals together and adapt as understanding evolves. In practice, this may include explicitly naming uncertainty in staff and leadership forums, inviting multiple interpretations of emerging risks or using short "pause and reflect" moments to revisit assumptions before committing to major decisions.[7]

Leaders are also required to **convene rather than decide**. In wicked contexts, formal authority, while still important, is rarely sufficient on its own. This is when interdependence across roles, functions and partners is highest. Acting as curators of collective intelligence, leaders create the conditions for sensemaking and judgment by convening people across roles, levels and boundaries, including staff with operational and contextual knowledge, peer leaders and external partners. Practices such as cross-functional or cross-partner dialogues, supporting small and reversible experiments, and creating permission to test and adapt rather than scale prematurely help distribute leadership and reduce over-reliance on formal authority.[8]

Transparency is critical to sustaining legitimacy. Leaders should **make trade-offs visible** to those affected by and involved in the work, including staff, partners and relevant stakeholders, by communicating not only what decisions are made, but why. This includes explaining which values, risks or constraints were weighed, and what remains uncertain or open to revision. Evidence from adaptive leadership and governance research suggests that openness about uncertainty can strengthen trust, even when decisions are contested.[9]

Finally, leaders (including governance bodies) should **normalize relational and care-based work as legitimate leadership responsibilities**. This includes recognizing emotional labour, trust-building and staff well-being as core leadership work, for instance, by modeling boundaries, legitimizing conversations about strain and moral tension, or investing time in repairing relationships after funding or strategic shifts. Research from health and humanitarian systems shows that neglecting care under sustained pressure undermines performance and resilience over time.[10]

6 Heifetz, Grashow & Linsky, 2009; Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey, 2007; Ramalingam, 2013
7 Heifetz et al., 2009; Snowden & Boone, 2007
8 Grint, 2005; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007
9 Heifetz et al., 2009; Gaventa, 2006.
10 WHO, 2022; ODI, 2023.

Implications for organizations: Shifts in structures and routines

Organizations play a decisive role in either enabling or constraining adaptive leadership. To function effectively in complex environments, organizations must build **adaptive capacity alongside operational capacity**, treating learning, reflection and course correction as core functions rather than discretionary add-ons. This can include protecting time for collective reflection during periods of rapid change, or resourcing roles and processes that connect field-level insight to strategic decision-making.[11]

Where possible, organizations should shift from rigid, overly prescriptive procedures toward **principles-based guidance** that allows teams to exercise judgment in context. For example, replacing detailed procedural requirements with clear decision principles or non-negotiables can help teams respond responsibly to changing conditions while remaining aligned with organizational values.[12]

Learning mechanisms, such as after-action reviews, iterative planning cycles or real-time feedback loops, should be **directly linked to decision-making**, rather than existing as parallel or retrospective processes. Evidence from evaluation and learning literature shows that learning disconnected from strategy, resourcing or partnership decisions has limited impact on practice.[13]

Governance arrangements also matter. Boards and senior leadership teams should be designed to **hold tension rather than eliminate it**, for example by explicitly surfacing competing priorities, legitimizing revisiting decisions as conditions change and resisting pressure for false certainty. Research on paradox and adaptive leadership highlights that effectiveness depends on sustaining these tensions over time, not resolving them once and for all.[14]

Implications for funders, networks and intermediaries: Shifts in incentives

Leadership practice is shaped by the wider ecosystem in which organizations operate. Funders and intermediaries therefore play a critical role in determining which leadership behaviours are rewarded or constrained. Funding and accountability mechanisms should **reflect the degree of uncertainty and complexity** involved in the work. For example, in complex and politically sensitive contexts, rigid targets and fixed indicators can discourage leaders from adapting to changing conditions or responding to local realities. In contrast, funding arrangements that allow goals or approaches to be revisited over time enable leaders to exercise judgment and learn from action.[15]

Accountability systems should explicitly value **learning and adaptation**, not only compliance and delivery against predefined indicators. This can include recognizing course correction as a sign of responsible management, incorporating learning narratives into reporting or allowing outcomes to evolve as contexts shift. Evidence from development evaluation shows that rigid accountability frameworks discourage experimentation and reinforce risk aversion, even when innovation is publicly encouraged by donors.[16]

Finally, funders and networks should invest in **leadership as a collective system capacity**, not only individual development. This includes resourcing peer learning spaces, cross-organizational sensemaking forums, and leadership support structures that address burnout and psychological safety as effectiveness issues.[17]

11 Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; Ramalingam, 2013
12 Snowden & Boone, 2007; OECD, 2020
13 ALNAP, 2018; OECD-DAC, 2021
14 Smith & Lewis, 2011; Heifetz et al., 2009
15 OECD, 2020; Peace Direct, 2021; Grand Bargain, 2022
16 ALNAP, 2018; OECD DAC, 2021
17 Uhl-Bien et al., 2007; ODI, 2023

Conclusion

The challenges facing global health and gender equality organizations are unlikely to become simpler or more predictable. Responding effectively will depend less on refining existing tools and more on strengthening leadership systems that can hold uncertainty, navigate tension and adapt over time. The capacities and practices outlined in this report offer a practical foundation for doing so.

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CanWaCH
Canadian Partnership for Women and Children's Health

CanSFE
Partenariat canadien pour la santé des femmes et des enfants

In partnership with Canada

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This report draws on a mix of academic research, leadership theory and sector practice. References are provided to support key concepts and recommendations rather than to offer an exhaustive review of the literature.

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Annex A:
Macro and Sector Trends Inventory

A1. Macro level trends shaping the landscape

Trend	Trend Description	Problem Type	Why Tame / Complicated / Wicked
Geopolitical volatility	Intensifying geopolitical competition and conflict dynamics affecting global cooperation, economic stability (recession feats, weakening labour markets) and humanitarian operations. (**World Economic Forum**)	**Wicked**	Multiple interconnected actors, rapid shifts and no single locus of control; unpredictable intersections with other systemic risks
Nationalism	Resurgent nationalism shaping policy, trade and multilateral commitments, influencing foreign aid, mobility and civil liberties. (**World Economic Forum**)	**Wicked**	Nationalist shifts reconfigure cooperation and institutional alliances without clear solutions
Shrinking civic space alongside democratic backsliding and populist rhetoric	Heightened restrictions on civil society and political freedoms in multiple regions, impacting advocacy, civic engagement and human rights work. (**World Economic Forum**) Populism and democratic backsliding are weakening institutions, rights and multilateral cooperation. (**IDEA**)	**Wicked**	Evolving legal and digital repression complicates planning, protection and engagement Democratic backsliding is wicked because its causes are contested and interdependent, and responses often trigger political backlash.
Anti-Gender backlash	Rising backlash against gender equality initiatives, LGBTQI+ rights and reproductive rights reflects political, cultural and identity-based contestation globally. (**IDS**)	**Wicked**	Cultural, religious and political forces interact unpredictably with social policy
Global governance shifts	Erosion of traditional multilateral leadership and greater diffusion of power in global decision-making and cooperation structures. (**World Economic Forum**)	**Complicated → Wicked**	Multiple institutions, fragmented authority, non-aligned governance norms
Migration	Global migration is expanding due to conflict, climate and economic pressures, placing strain on health, social services and governance systems. (**MPI**)	**Wicked**	Migration intensifies health system pressures and gendered vulnerabilities, creating complex planning and partnership challenges for global health and gender equality organizations.

Trend	Trend Description	Problem Type	Why Tame / Complicated / Wicked
Youth demographic shift	Growth in youth populations, especially in low- and middle-income regions, presenting both opportunity and strain for social systems and political expression. (**PRB**)	**Complicated**	The trend is predictable but its social, economic and political implications vary regionally
Crisis of belonging	Fragmentation of social cohesion, social isolation post-pandemic, declining trust in institutions and rising identity-based polarization affecting social stability. (**UN**, **WHO**); Epidemiological mistrust (vaccine hesitancy, distrust in public health data, rejection of expertise)	**Wicked**	Deep societal fractures and narratives fuel volatile social responses. Epidemiological mistrust is a wicked problem because it is a trust and legitimacy challenge, not an information deficit
Aging workforce and gendered age distribution	Increasing proportions of older adults interacting with workforce participation, pension systems and caregiving demands. (**OECD**)	**Complicated**	Predictable demographic shift with complex economic, social and gendered implications
Surveillance risks	Expansion of digital surveillance capabilities, sensors and data platforms, challenging privacy, civil liberties and trust, creating exposure for users without meaningful consent. (**World Economic Forum**)	**Wicked**	Surveillance creates irresolvable trade-offs between security, access, safety and rights, with diffuse accountability and unequal power.
AI and data governance	Rapid use of AI and data analytics raises questions of accountability, bias and equitable governance. (**BIG Charity Law Group**)	**Wicked**	Technology rapidly seeping into systems without fully developed ethical or legal frameworks. The use of AI creates trade-offs between efficiency, fairness, accountability and judgement.
Climate crises	Escalating climate impacts (extreme weather, ecosystem degradation) undermining livelihoods, health and infrastructure. (**World Economic Forum**)	**Wicked**	Nonlinear impacts with cascading effects across systems
Planetary health	Recognition that human health is inseparable from ecological systems, requiring integrative approaches across health, environment and economy. (**WHO**)	**Wicked**	Environmental and social systems are tightly linked, creating complex ripple effects without clear causes or easy fixes.
Youth movements	Transnational, digitally connected youth-led activism challenging governance, inequality and social norms, increasingly linked across causes. (**UN**); social justice **reform**	**Wicked**	Leaderless, decentralized and rapidly evolving movements defy traditional institutional engagement

A2. Sector-Specific Challenges

Non-profit funding precarity

Chronic volatility in donor funding, shrinking aid budgets and short-term grant cycles undermine organizational stability while increasing expectations for long-term impact, forcing leaders to navigate survival and mission simultaneously.

New philanthropic models

Shifts within private and institutional philanthropy, such as trust-based giving, participatory grant making, unrestricted funding and impact-first capital are reshaping power relations between funders and NGOs, challenging traditional accountability norms and organizational hierarchies.

New models for foreign assistance

Bilateral and multilateral aid is increasingly shaped by geopolitical interests, results-based financing, blended finance and localization-driven funding shifts (including direct-to-local mechanisms), and private donors who are filling in gaps left by bilateral donors, altering who sets priorities, how success is defined and how risk is distributed across the system.

Enterprise-driven, market-based development

Development approaches that prioritize market solutions, entrepreneurship and private-sector partnerships are reframing impact around scalability, financial sustainability and economic returns, often privileging commercial logics alongside or over rights-based and community-defined outcomes.

Value-for-money pressures

Heightened scrutiny on efficiency, attribution and measurable results collides with the relational, long-horizon nature of systems change and gender equality work, creating tension between accountability and learning.

Accelerated pace of change

Overlapping crises compress decision timelines, destabilize strategic planning cycles and demand continuous adaptation, while organizational systems and governance remain built for predictability and control.

Threats to the human rights system

Erosion of multilateral norms, rising authoritarianism and selective enforcement weaken human rights frameworks, placing civil society actors in increasingly constrained and politicized operating environments.

Justice-based development paradigms

Growing emphasis on racial, gender, climate and economic justice reframe development from service delivery to power transformation, challenging leaders to integrate moral clarity with institutional pragmatism.

Localization, decolonization and reduced Western hegemony

Commitments to shift power, resources and decision-making to local actors expose deep structural contradictions between rhetoric and practice within funding, governance and accountability systems.

Donor influence and conditionalities

Donor priorities, risk tolerance and compliance regimes continue to shape strategy and behaviour, creating persistent tension between organizational autonomy, mission integrity and financial viability.

Organizational burnout, staff well-being and psychological safety

Sustained crisis conditions, ethical strain and workload intensification are eroding workforce resilience, making well-being and psychological safety leadership imperatives rather than issues to be relegated to human resource teams.

Annex B: Leadership Competency Framework

1. Sensemaking in Complexity

Competency statement

Leaders cultivate shared understanding in conditions of uncertainty by helping others interpret changing realities, surface assumptions and act without waiting for complete information.

Observable behaviours:

- Names uncertainty explicitly and normalizes incomplete or evolving information
- Facilitates dialogue to interpret emerging patterns, risks and trade-offs
- Encourages iterative action and adjustment over time rather than premature closure
- Translates complexity into coherent, actionable narratives for diverse actors

Supporting practices:

- Regular reflection and learning forums (e.g., after-action reviews, pause-and-reflect moments)
- Routine exchange of information and feedback across teams, levels and partners
- Psychological safety for questioning assumptions and revising decisions

2. Paradox Navigation and Tension Holding

Competency statement

Leaders remain effective in the presence of enduring tensions by holding, revisiting and working productively within paradox rather than seeking premature resolution.

Observable behaviours:

- Names competing demands openly without forcing false either/or choices
- Balances decisiveness with openness to revision
- Maintains legitimacy by acknowledging constraints, uncertainty and trade-offs

Supporting practices:

- Leadership coaching and peer reflection focused on dilemma and paradox navigation
- Decision-making approaches that allow plans to be adjusted as conditions change
- Explicit permission to revisit and revise decisions as contexts shift

3. Relational Leadership and Care-Based Practice

Competency statement

Leaders build trust, resilience and sustained performance by attending to relationships, emotional labour and care under conditions of pressure and stress both for others and for themselves.

Observable behaviours

- Creates space for honest dialogue about stress, uncertainty and moral tension
- Models boundaries and self-care as legitimate leadership practices
- Attends to team dynamics and relational health, not only task delivery

Supporting practices

- Structured peer support, supervision or coaching for leaders
- Organizational norms that recognize emotional labour as part of leadership work
- Monitoring of workload, well-being and relational strain at leadership levels

4. Adaptive Judgment and Decision-Making

Competency statement

Leaders make timely, ethical decisions in conditions of uncertainty by exercising judgment, learning from action, explicitly weighing trade-offs, power asymmetries and risk, and by sustaining legitimacy through transparency rather than control.

Observable behaviours

- Makes decisions with incomplete information while clearly naming assumptions, risks and trade-offs
- Weighs ethical implications, power dynamics and potential harm alongside operational considerations
- Explains the rationale behind decisions, including what is uncertain or contested
- Resists over-reliance on rigid tools or procedures

Supporting practices

- Decision-making approaches that allow plans to be adjusted as conditions change
- Explicit discussion of risk, ethics and power in leadership decision forums
- Documentation practices that capture decision rationale, assumptions and trade-offs

5. Systems Holding and Stewardship

Competency statement

Leaders act as stewards of complex systems, mediating competing interests, power asymmetries and accountabilities without relying on formal authority, while sustaining coherence, legitimacy and shared purpose under strain.

Observable behaviours

- Keeps attention on shared purpose, even when priorities are competing or conditions are chaotic
- Accepts accountability for results while recognizing that authority and influence are limited
- Aligns local action and decisions with broader system priorities, incentives and risks
- Absorbs volatility without transferring undue pressure downward

Supporting practices

- Clear articulation of shared purpose, values and non-negotiables
- Governance arrangements that acknowledge shared responsibility for outcomes across actors
- Senior-level peer spaces to reflect on system-level tensions and power dynamics
- Decision-making approaches that allow plans to be adjusted as conditions change

6. Enabling Adaptive Conditions

Competency statement

Leaders intentionally shape organizational structures, routines and norms that enable learning, adaptation and discretionary judgment rather than compliance alone.

Observable behaviours

- Identifies and addresses structures or processes that constrain adaptation
- Advocates for flexibility where procedures inhibit timely response
- Creates permission for experimentation, learning and course correction
- Balances risk management with responsiveness to changing conditions

Supporting practices

- Flexible planning, funding and resourcing mechanisms
- Feedback loops between field realities and organizational systems
- Incentives and performance expectations aligned with learning and adaptation