

Professional identity formation in the aid sector

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There are seven distinct experiences that collaborate to shape our professional identity.¹ If we accept the metaphor that likens professional identity formation to a journey, then these experiences can be likened to landmarks along a road that bolster the traveller's confidence that they are still on the right path. These landmarks shaped the professional identity of the research participants by affirming their competence and verifying their membership. All seven *landmarks* were not found in all the participants but most of the *landmarks* were found in most of the participants. These are:

1. Having a job in the sector
2. Being entrusted with leadership responsibility
3. Being invited to *sit at the table*
4. Experiencing job success
5. Mastering vocabulary and jargon
6. Earning a sector specific qualification, licence, or graduate degree
7. Experiencing inner satisfaction or *fit*

Most of these landmarks of professional identity are in a continuously process of being verified, or not, through lived experience. Professional identity formation is the *process* by which a person self-identifies with a particular profession. Reflected appraisals (i.e. a person's perception of how others see and evaluate them) play a prominent role in the formation of professional identity. These landmarks of professional identity formation carry different weight for different people. Different research participants attach different meanings and importance to different landmarks. All the landmarks emerged from the lived experiences of the research participants.

¹ This article is derived from a chapter in Scott's doctrinal thesis from the University of Edinburgh. For the full thesis and associated references click the link [here](#). The collective case study involved twelve research participants employed by ten different international NGOs. At the time of the interviews all the research participants had a minimum of five years of field experience and were living in one of ten different host countries: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Pakistan, Yemen, Mauritania, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sudan, and Democratic Republic of Congo. Some of the participants had additional significant humanitarian field experience in Egypt, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Sudan. The average age of the participants was 47 and average field experience 12.5 years. The first name of the participant follows their quote in this article.

1. Having a job in the sector

Having a job as an international aid worker is the first professional identity landmark in the journey. Without a paying job in the sector it is difficult, if not impossible, to get validation of one's professional identity from either self or others. Having a job that is unpaid can be significant in shaping professional identity but not as much as a paid job. My data showed that the experience of having a job within the aid sector influenced the formation of professional identities because a job a) influenced how others saw them, b) how they described themselves, and c) in some cases what they imagined they could become. In Nigel's case, he regarded a job during his gap year as being the most important first step in shaping his professional identity as an international aid worker. His short term experience helped him understand that international aid work was a *good fit* (#7) for him. After Nigel's gap year in Sudan he went on to university and gained his chartered accountant credentials believing that such a qualification would help him get back to North Africa as an international aid worker. Eighteen years later, at age 36, Nigel returned to North Africa as a financial director for an INGO. Nigel patience waited eighteen years for the right timing.

For Manfred, having a paid job was an important landmark in his professional identity formation. Below he and his wife Doris describe their excitement when a German government institution was willing to pay Manfred high fees for his first consultancy job. Their family had lived for several years on Doris' modest nursing salary while Manfred studied at graduate school in London.

Manfred: But things went quite well and after one of these short trips where I was one of the consultants and I got paid for the first time. It was a lot of money! It was great! Ten days' worth of money just for giving some advice and being along and writing a couple pages!

Doris: Oh what a nice change. Plus they paid the airplane ticket and the housing! It was another world!

Manfred and Doris were pleased to learn how much Manfred's knowledge was worth both in monetary terms and social capital. They had both worked a self-supported

volunteers for many years in the Middle East. As a result of landing a high paying consultancy with a prestigious German organisation Manfred's professional identity received powerful validation. He now knew *experientially* that his knowledge and experience were in demand and it seemed to contribute significantly to the birth of a new self-identity. Having a job with a prestigious INGO or UN body seemed to have special validating powers with at least five of the research participants. *Having a job* as an international aid worker is the initial validation of professional identity by self and others.

2. Being entrusted with leadership responsibility

Being asked to lead a programme or project (even more so than a Master's degree, #5) is a distinguishing event in professional identity formation. This landmark appeared frequently in my case studies. Peter had a university degree in finance but never worked in finance as a profession and did not self-identify as a "finance guy". After graduating from university he battled thyroid cancer for three years and then completed two years of a three year graduate school programme. Peter then worked five years as a social worker in America. Next he moved overseas and worked for five years coordinating a small community health project in Uzbekistan. At age 37 Peter was fluent in Uzbek but did not have a clear professional self-identity as an aid worker. He could do many things well but did not have a particular focus. That began to change in 2001 as a humanitarian crisis in northern Afghanistan began to unfold.

I've always had in my heart a desire to respond when there was an emergency someplace. But I never had a talent that anybody wanted. You know, "Are you an engineer? A water engineer? Are you this or are you that?" No, I was never any of those things. So nobody ever wanted me in one of those critical situations. But now in Afghanistan, in the northern part of Afghanistan a large part of the population speaks Uzbek ... And the country director for our NGO [in Uzbekistan] had been at meetings all about Afghanistan because he had worked with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. So he really wanted to see us start an office down there and expand our work into Afghanistan. He asked me if I'd be willing to do it. It sounded interesting but scary because I had never done relief work on that kind of level. I didn't have experience but I also had the desire to do something and the willingness to risk failure. Because I don't think you ever learn if you are good at something unless you try it. So this was my opportunity to try it. Peter.

In Peter's case, his country director had confidence that he could succeed and gave him an opportunity. This was the start of Peter's transition from being a community development/social worker to becoming an influential humanitarian aid leader in Afghanistan and Darfur. Peter's willingness to take risks coupled with his boss' confidence was instrumental in his professional identity development.

Karin is a licensed German paediatric physical therapist. She had four years of professional education and more than six years of professional practice in Germany before moving to Uzbekistan at age 28 where she worked for nine years. Within a few years of working in Uzbekistan Karin began to experience a change in her professional self-identity. She felt a transition taking place from physiotherapy to international development programme leader. Before she started her Master's in International Community Disability studies at the age of 37 she had already made the transition in her professional self-identity. She described her transition experience from physiotherapy to humanitarian project leader like this:

I mean I was just a physio, just wanting to go out there and work with the kids. I didn't really think about what is going to happen when I'm gone or teaching someone else how to do that. Those things hadn't been on my mind before going [to Uzbekistan]. Karin.

I think somewhere half way in the Uzbekistan years, maybe after four or five years... I think with taking on the leadership. Even in 1999 I was taking on more responsibility – to talking with governments and things like that which obviously I wouldn't do as a physio. Then also, when the other projects started to become bigger ... the income generation carpet making project. I did spend a good part of my time talking with the project leader there about taxes and business registrations which is totally different from physical therapy. So that is definitely the time that things kind of changed ... Probably in those early years as a leader that transition from physio to "I'm a leader of a development organisation" Karin.

When asked what affect her master's degree had on her professional identity she responded:

I think it was more about getting it on paper rather than just in my head and my heart. [laughter] So I think I had the identity much earlier. And because I had that and I knew that if I would have to leave the development work for some reason and go back to Germany for family reason or something else, I didn't

want to be a physio again. I felt I needed to get a diploma that actually said I was what I was. So that was part of the motivation for doing it. Karin.

So for Karin, her professional self-identity had changed to the point where she wanted a diploma as evidence of her new professional identity. Peter however, expressed no interest in earning a diploma as evidence of his new professional. He felt his job success (and other verifying landmarks) was evidence enough of who he was to self and others. So for both Peter and Karin, job success (#4), especially in leadership responsibilities, served as evidence that they were successfully mastering the job competencies expected of aid professionals.

3. Being invited to *sit-at-the-table*

Manfred's first experience with being invited to sit-at-the-table happened when he was around 44. Up to this point his professional self-identity was in the process of being formed. He had recently finished his PhD and what he thought was a one-off consultancy job for a major German institutional aid donor. He only got the consultancy job because the donor's normal consultants were unavailable. Manfred describes his experience of being invited to sit-at-the-table as follows:

... after one of these short trips where I was one of the consultants, and I got paid for the first time ... I was invited along to give a briefing on something. All of a sudden I find myself sitting with EMEY people [a highly respected German development organisation]. People I didn't know before and from government ministry which funds it all. So on one trip we came back from Saa'da and there we were, ten people sitting there... and [one of them asks] "Oh Herr Manfred, what do you think is going to happen now in Saa'da [capital of Yemen]?"...and they looked to me and said, "Give us your perception on how to manage this and the likely risks." Manfred.

The experience of being *invited-to-the-table* was a landmark experience for Manfred and many of my case study participants' professional identity formation. Manfred related his first sit-at-the-table experience with fond affection. I interpreted the fact that he volunteered this story without any specific prompting was indicative of how important and transformational the experience was to his professional identity verification process. Within a short time Manfred was regularly being invited to *sit-at-the-table* by other experts and members of respected institutions. He became one of them as they assimilated him into their exclusive circle of expert consultants.

Peter's professional journey is also full of *sit-at-the-table* landmarks. The invitations grew in number and quality as his professional experience and competency grew. He described it in this way:

So in Afghanistan, I kind of went from afraid of being embarrassed (that I don't know all these acronyms) and at first not saying anything to "I know as much as these people do and I may even know more." For two and a half years we didn't have an official representative structure of the NGO community but me and this other guy became kind of the defacto [leaders of the NGO network in northern Afghanistan]. So when I arrived in Darfur, there it's a more formal structure. You have an NGO steering committee, an NGO forum, etc. Then the NGO steering committee members are in the humanitarian forum with the UN and the area security management team. So when I first got there, I think the first meeting I was at, one of the ladies on the NGO steering committee (after drilling me with questions for one hour) said, "Okay, the next time we do elections you need to run for NGO steering committee." Peter.

So I played a bigger role in Darfur then even in Afghanistan. I've met with Ban Ki-Moon, the ambassadors, the special envoys, and the top people coming from DPKO and New York and the OCHA people who come from New York. Everybody kind of knows now to talk to me when they come. Which gives me a chance to try to put some input into the madness which is the humanitarian work in Darfur. Peter.

Peter's professional journey took him from the quiet backwater of social work in Texas, to community development work in Andijon, Uzbekistan (an even remoter location) and eventually to becoming an influential INGO leader in Darfur. His experience of being invited to *sit-at-the-table* is the functional equivalent of an accomplished journeyman being invited to join a master's guild. In my case studies, the invitations typically came from:

- International bodies (like UN organisations)
- Host governments
- Donors and partner organisations
- Programme beneficiaries
- Communities of Practice
- Colleagues

These all served to validate the professional identity of international aid workers. I noticed that Peter and Mike volunteered the most extensive and diverse set of *sit-at-the-table* invitations. It made me wonder if *sit-at-the-table* invitations are not especially cherished and validating by those new to the profession and/or by those who do not have strong academic validation of their professional identity. From their comments, Peter and Mike esteemed *sit-at-the-table* invitations more highly than academic credentials as evidence of professional competence. They enjoyed a quiet satisfaction that *experts* came to them for help even though they had fewer academic credentials than those they advised. But being asked to *sit-at-the-table* had strong validating effects for both professionals who have strong academic credentials, like Manfred and Karin, as well as those who do not, like Peter and Mike.

Being commended, published, or invited to present at conferences are all forms of being invited to *sit-at-the-table*. The notion that other professionals value your work shaped the research participants' view of themselves. Being asked to *sit-at-the-table* are examples of *reflective appraisals* or how our identity is shaped our perceptions of how others perceive us (Burke and Stets, 2009). In other words, when the research participants discovered influential stakeholders thought highly of their professional opinion it shaped their own self-identity. Five of the seven landmark experiences identified in my study can be interpreted as forms of reflected appraisals.

4. Seeing the impact of your work

This landmark appeared in different forms in all of my cases. Consider the following answers to my question: *What keeps you going?*

I think it's to see that it [i.e. my work] actually makes a difference. That's my main motivation. In all aspects of the work. Olav.

I think too, there is enormous satisfaction ... in Pakistan the NGO we work with, during the floods helped more than 50,000 people ... to know we are making a difference in those peoples' lives. Clare.

Hope that things will change! [Laughter] No, I think definitely seeing change. Karin.

So another part of it is that we are doing something worthwhile. We are making a positive difference. Spencer.

Experiencing job success serves as evidence of professional competence and validates professional identity. International aid interventions are judged on their impact but there is no clear consensus of what *impact* means or how it is measured, but the notions of positive change or averting negative change are central to the concept (Hofmann, 2004). Nonetheless, impact is a key expectation of all stakeholders involved in aid interventions (ibid.). When the research participants saw the impact of their work it reinforced their sense of professional competency and job satisfaction. Therefore *job successes* become important landmarks of professional identity formation. For example, Karin describes how her work in Tajikistan had impact both on individual local women and on government policy. In the narrative below she describes her work of integrating children with disabilities into the regular public school system in Tajikistan.

And there are two ladies that I met as moms of disabled children. Very insecure women wondering, “Why do I deserve this? Why do I have a disabled child?” And today the project is serving 165 children and families and these two ladies have both joined us as staff and are now on the leadership team for this new NGO that has just been established so they are NGO directors ... They are totally different people than they were five years ago. To see that sort of thing, individual lives change. But also I think on a bigger level. Like recently after the polio outbreak there has been a change in the government in looking at community based ideas of rehabilitation rather than hospitals. So suddenly the government is getting something that you’ve tried to explain for five or six years. And them saying, “Yes, we need your help with that... It feels like there is momentum, something will happen in the next two or three years that I want to be part of. Karin.

Karin’s experience of seeing the impact of her work gives her confidence that she will see more impact in the future. Experiencing job success contributes to the enjoyment and sustainability of their professional journey. I believe this is particularly important for the expatriate humanitarian professional. Typically they are making personal sacrifices to work in situations that are considerably more difficult and unsafe than their home country situations. Seeing the impact of their work helps answer the question; “Is it worth the sacrifice? Is it worth all the hardships?” Apparently my case

study participants were able to consistently answer “Yes, it is worth it!” For example Betty, after 20 years in Mauritania says:

And every now and then you see something just wonderfully encouraging. I was just thinking of a survey we did maybe two years ago. We really did see the difference that literacy makes. You can read about all the studies that other people had done that shows how literacy reduces infant mortality, but here to see it with our own data, with our own programmes. You know, that these women who were literate really did have fewer child deaths than illiterate mothers. Wow, the things I read about in India or Brazil or Kenya or Uganda ... to see it is true here in Mauritania too ... and look this is happening because of our programme. Yeah, so that is something... Betty.

Doris had a professional identity transformation from nurse to educator in development projects when she began to teach English to adult Yemenis men.

Scott: Was there a time when you stopped seeing yourself as a nurse and started seeing yourself as an educator?

Doris: Yes, very much so ... when I started [teaching English] with these Yemeni engineers they were in their 30s but had all studied abroad and I would ask them a lot of questions and I always say that being an older foreign woman in the Middle East is the best position you can have because as an older woman you are respected. So because that was such a positive experience I saw, ‘Oh, I do this quite well.’ And I had other groups and then when I started planning programmes that was something I volunteered for because I had good ideas. It kind of builds up ... ‘Oh, I can do this. I’m quite good at this.’ Then you get more ideas. So it was probably during those first three years [i.e. that I began to see myself as an educator]. Doris.

Doris had such a positive experience as an English teacher in Yemen that she began to develop a professional self-identity as an educator. Over the next few years this professional self-identity superseded her self-identity as a nurse. I contend that the experience of *job success* validates and shapes professional identity formation.

5. Mastering vocabulary and jargon

Speaking a common language is an important characteristic of community membership and role identity (Burke and Stets, 2009). If you do not understand the vocabulary associated with an identity for which you claim membership your identity

and membership will not be authenticated by self or others. The connection between language and professional identity is well established (Richards, 2006). Therefore it is not surprising that during the early stages of their professional journey lack of sector specific vocabulary was a source of anxiety for some of the research participants. For example:

Then I got to Afghanistan and you have the weekly NGO humanitarian meeting maybe UN as well at the OCHA office and at first I just sat quietly because the relief field has its own vocabulary. I was uncomfortable. I thought ‘Oh wow, these people really know what they are talking about.’ And I was very intimidated. Peter.

And at the beginning I was kind of a bit scared. The terminology I didn’t know. Manfred.

Karin explains how her promotion from being a hands-on physiotherapist to being a project manager over several international aid projects forced her to learn about accounting terminology.

I certainly had to learn a whole new language. I kept telling people that I wasn’t just learning Tajik but also bookkeepish because of all the specialized terminology that auditors use and all that. It was quite a new area. Karin.

Learning sector specific vocabulary and jargon reduces anxiety and promotes a sense of professional belonging. Those who enter the international aid sector via the *on-the-job*, *sector-switch*, and *late bloomer* pathways² will likely experience anxiety and lack certain validations to their professional identity until the sector specific vocabulary, jargon, and acronyms are learned.

6. Earning a sector specific graduate degree

Betty, Karin, Doris, and Manfred were the four research participants who earned sector specific graduate degrees. Betty earned her graduate degree(s) before launching into her humanitarian career. In many professions an undergraduate degree is no longer sufficient for even an entry level job. A master’s degree has become the normative

² Another part of my research identifies the four prominent “on ramps” or pathways by which people initially join or prepare to join the international aid sector. For more details click [here](#) and go to page 131.

prerequisite for getting an entry level job in the international aid sector. Graduate school education was a little less necessary when my research participants started their careers. However, Betty adopted this posture not because she needed a license but because she felt the fastest route to professional competence was through an intense graduate degree programme. Betty also enjoyed academic work as she once considered academics as a career. Manfred had spent a lot of time in the Middle East in non-professional roles before he earned his BA, and MA in his mid 30s, and his PhD in his 40s. Karin a paediatric physiotherapist and Doris a registered nurse earned graduate degrees in order to retool and validate their newly emerged professional identities. We already heard that Karin's professional self-identity had changed before she pursued a sector specific graduate degree. However, she reckoned a graduate degree was necessary if people in Europe were to validate her new professional identity especially if she was no longer in the field.

... I went to London and joined the Institute of Child Health for a Masters in community disabilities studies. It is part of the University College of London. So I did a Master's in International Community Disabilities Studies, which is basically development studies, international health, with a focus on people with disabilities. Karin.

... I felt I needed to get a diploma that actually said I was what I was. So that was part of the motivation for doing it. Part of it I just wanted to learn and reflect on things we've been doing and learn for the future but part of it was to have the right piece of paper so I could do it in Europe or in Germany from a headquarters' perspective. Karin.

Doris's professional journey was shaped more by taking advantage of opportunities than it was by long-term planning. She earned her master's in educational management because she increasingly found pleasure, job satisfaction and opportunities in education. Unlike Karin's master's degree which built upon her original professional degree, Doris used her master's degree to transform her professional identity from nurse to educator.

I think ever since that time my career has evolved in response to opportunities along the way ... [my Master's] in Educational Management from Aston University in Birmingham. Actually it started when I was working as a nurse and someone asked me if I could coach their husband [in English] and I kind of got in to that and I first started with some kind of advanced certificate and

kind of worked up. Because in the time that I was teaching I found out that I was quite good at that and it was something I could do. It was actually Educational Management in TEFOL. But it was the educational management that appealed to me. By that stage I had seen that a lot of jobs are being at the right place at the right time, or contacts or whatever. I use to think that was just in the Middle East but it really is not. You know it is who you know and being introduced and being there at the right time and I thought that would help. So I guess all of that is to say that it has always been happen chance. Opportunities that were presented or the circumstances you're in. How can you make the most of it? Doris.

Not all of the research participants thought master's degrees were important to their professional identity. They considered experience and job success enough to validate their professional identities.

I don't have a master's degree in humanitarian international development or something like that, but I have a lot of experience. And I think the cultural understanding background and realising the value of knowing the language, even though my Arabic's poor I can at least do some of the stuff in Arabic... that village leaders will call me and there are a number of them that will just call me if I'm leaving on vacation and they know it, they'll call me. We have a relationship. Peter.

7. Experiencing inner pleasure or *fit*

According to Iaffaldano and Muchinsky (1985) there is no strong pervasive relation between job satisfaction and job performance. However, there is evidence in my case study that the experience of inner satisfaction or *fit* is an element that helps shape professional identity. I saved the discussion of this landmark to the end because it is a bit more nuanced than those previously discussed. Early in my data coding process I noticed that three of the research participants used a variation of the phrase *fit me well* to describe different aspects of their work. I also noticed that other research participants seemed to enjoy their job and not just because they achieved good results or outcomes but they seemed to find pleasure in the job itself. Not pleasure in every aspect of their job but in many aspects. As I was reflecting on this a quote came to mind from Eric Liddell, the Scottish 1924 Olympic gold medallist in the 400 meters and subject of the movie *Chariots of Fire*. Liddell is reported to have said:

I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast! And when I run I feel his pleasure.

This quote seemed to capture a concept similar to what I was seeing in the lived experiences of many of the research participants. I concluded that many of the research participants felt the equivalent of what Eric Liddell experienced when he ran, that is an inner sense of pleasure, satisfaction, or *fit* while doing their work. This pleasure seemed to be generated from the doing of their jobs rather than just from successful results. I propose that the experience of inner satisfaction or *fit* helps verify professional self-identity. It is a type of intrinsic reward. Identity theorists credit intrinsic rewards as a primary determiner in an identity's prominence (Burke and Stets, 2009). Not all job requirements gave inner satisfaction or joy but those that did seemed to contribute to professional identity formation. Consider Manfred's longing to go back to the good old days when he was not restricted to the capital of Yemen because of security concerns:

I'm most confident and happy if I could go back to some small village and try to help people. That would give me a lot of satisfaction and joy. Manfred.

At several places in Manfred's interviews there was evidence that he found deep satisfaction and pleasure in face-to-face conversation with local villagers. To him it was the greatest part of his work. As security issues restricted him from making visits to the villages he seemed to experience less pleasure from his job. Similarly, Karin, now an NGO leader stationed in the capital of Tajikistan, talked about the pleasures she derived from face-to-face grass-roots development work. Notice that in both these narratives the pleasure seems to emerge from the doing rather than the results, although arguably they may have found less pleasure if they had been unsuccessful.

I think getting out myself again and doing some project work is definitely positive rather than just doing administrative things and government relations. So actually meeting with the village people and teaching and training people myself again is something I immensely enjoy and it adds value to the job to be able to do that. Karin.

Karin also seems to derive a great deal of satisfaction from meetings with people from other NGOs as part of her role as an INGO leader.

A lot of people are asked to lead the development work in our circles feel they have to waste a lot of time in meetings, while I don't feel they are a waste of time. I actually quite enjoy that part. So that has definitely helped in job satisfaction and that is a good way to spend my time because that is also relationships. Karin.

Betty said the following while commenting on how much she enjoys her leadership role in a business training programme she is helping run in Mauritania:

There are times I feel like I'm doing something I've been made and gifted to do. But, I would say that one of the big reasons I've stayed on the field so long - continued in this NGO work - is that there is a sense of how well it fits my gifts and skills. I very much feel made to do this, so that most days I truly enjoy being here, and enjoy the work I have to do. Betty.

So while it is difficult to prove a direct link between intrinsic pleasure in doing a task and professional identity formation, the proposition is consistent with McCall and Simmons' (1978) articulation of identity theory.

Another factor influencing placement of an identity in the prominence hierarchy is the rewards individuals receive from the identity, both extrinsic and intrinsic ... Intrinsic rewards are the gratifications that individuals experience, internally, for the performance of a role ... The more the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards associated with a particular identity, the higher that identity is in the prominence hierarchy (Burke and Stets, 2009: 40).

If intrinsic joy, pleasure, and sense of *fit* are derived from performing a task or role as an international aid worker, identity theory suggests that it is an important factor in professional identity formation.

Implications for professional practice [SO WHAT]

What does all this mean? While this study doesn't necessarily introduce ideas that are totally new to human resource and programme leaders it does add nuance, value, and perspective. Here are a few thoughts:

Graduate degree programmes

A graduate degree is the de facto professional credential for the aid sector. However, a graduate degree was more important to how the research participants thought others

viewed them than it was to how they viewed themselves. This seems to be especially true for people who are transitioning into the aid sector from another profession or occupation. The graduate degree is frequently more important as a credential, and the role a credential plays in professional identity, than for the actual learning that takes place in gaining the credential. Since there is a well-established link between language and identity mastery of the vocabulary of the international aid sector should be a part of professional education and the organizational on boarding process. All master degrees preparing people for the aid sector should include project management courses since project management is the dominate job skill required throughout the sector. Since “experiencing inner satisfaction or fit” is dependent both on the tasks of the job and the relationships with people surrounding the job, all graduate programmes should teach courses on personal conflict resolution.

Internships

Internships provided opportunity to master vocabulary, experience inner pleasure or fit from the job, and potentially experiencing some level of job success. A successful internship shapes professional identity differently than being fully hired, but still internships influenced the professional identity formation. Internships are likely the best scenario for a student to experience (or not) inner pleasure or fit from the job and collegial relationships. If a professional education/master’s program does not include a field internship it is difficult to imagine that a student would have enough time to test this in real life. It was not *imagining* the fit and inner pleasure that shaped the professional identity of the research participants, it was the *experiencing* of it

Staff on-boarding and on-the-job learning

Experiencing inner pleasure or fit may be experienced in an internship but will be tested on-the-job as new and varied experiences become part of the professional journeys. INGOs should consider taking an active part in helping staff find roles within the organisation where they can experience these landmarks. If a person is not experiencing *job success* or *inner pleasure* in their role perhaps there is another job within the INGO where they can? This would require INGOs to have an organisational culture that could tolerate a degree of experimentation and even failures

from new staff. Staff would also need to be conscious and proactive in seeking jobs where they can be successful and experience *fit* rather than seeking jobs because they provide status, power, or money. Remember that experiencing *fit* is not just a matter of having the right skills and aptitude for the job. *Fit* also has to do with fitting in with the team and people at work. It is also worthwhile for programme and HR leaders to keep in mind that *being invited to sit-at-the-table* contributes to professional identity formation and thus a sense of belonging. Who can you acknowledge and honour by asking them to give an opinion, write an article, or speak at workshop?

Summary

I discussed seven experiences that collaborate in the formation of professional identity in international aid sector (and perhaps all occupations). Different landmarks carry different weight for different people. Therefore even though an experience is significant in shaping one person's identity it may not be equally weighty for another. Different people attached different meanings and significance to different landmarks. These seven professional identity shaping events affected people in much the same way a physical landmark might reassure a traveller journeying along an unfamiliar road. For the research participants, landmarks provided evidence not only that they were competent but also that they belonged. A sense of belonging contributes to a healthy and productive INGO which in turn has the potential to make the world a better place to live.