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**Leadership Transition in the Sierra Leone Public Health Sector: Is it Succession or
Supercession?**

Dr. Alhassan Fouard Kanu



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^{1*}Dr. Alhassan Fouard Kanu
Institute for Health Professionals Development-Sierra Leone

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aimed to shed light on the leadership transition dynamics in the public health sector by exploring the factors hindering the effective implementation of succession planning and management (SPM) in the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health (MoH).

Methodology: A qualitative study design was used to understand the current leadership transition practices in the MoH. The study population is middle and senior leaders within the civil service between Grades 9 and 14. A purposive sample of eighteen (18) participants was interviewed, using a semi-structured guide. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. For the analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step framework for performing thematic analysis was followed. The MAXQDA 22 software was used for the text coding and storage.

Findings: The findings of this study point to a severe crisis in public health management capacity, driven by the lack of a structured system to develop and retain future leaders. The critical barriers that hinder succession planning were identified in three main themes: (1) Politics and nepotism (2) weak performance evaluation mechanism and (3) lack of resources/costs. Politics and tribalism were considered serious threats to succession planning. Some of the participants referred to the current practices in relation to leadership transition in the MoH as "supercession" and not succession. Generally, the study highlighted the following: **Leadership and Governance Deficit:** Effective public health management relies on strong, competent leadership at all levels. The lack of an effective succession management system creates a vacuum in management capacity, weakening the MoH's ability to coordinate, implement, and evaluate public health programs effectively. **Erosion of Management Systems:** The weak performance evaluation mechanism identified in the study is a fundamental management failure. When performance appraisals are flawed and not linked to promotions, it dismantles accountability, demotivates staff, and removes any objective basis for management decisions regarding career advancement. **Operational and Financial Inefficiency:** The lack of dedicated resources for SPM reflects poor financial management and a short-term perspective. The cost of not planning (frequent leadership crises, loss of institutional knowledge, poor staff morale, and constant external recruitment) is likely far higher than the investment in developing internal talent. This inefficiency undermines the return on investment in the health sector. Sierra Leone's efforts to strengthen its health system and achieve universal health coverage will be severely compromised by a recurring cycle of leadership instability and management failure.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: Succession Planning is a cornerstone of strategic human resources for health and the absence of a functional SPM system signifies a major gap in national health sector strategic planning. Utilizing the Human Capital Theory and the Signaling Theory, this study sought to understand the leadership transition practices in the public health sector of a post-conflict setting. The study revealed the weak strategic human resource planning in the MoH. The MoH's health sector plans lack the necessary components to build a sustainable leadership pipeline, threatening the long-term viability of all health programs. This study is important for policy and practice because it raises awareness about effective succession planning strategies that help in achieving sustainability by retaining talented staff and developing future leaders in the public health sector.

Keywords: Succession Planning, Succession Management, Leadership, Public Health, Public Sector

JEL Codes: I18 and I19; J18, J45

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INTRODUCTION

There is wide acceptance that leadership and governance have a significant impact on the success of organizations. Leadership and governance is an important component of the World Health Organization (2007) frameworks that describe health systems in terms of six (6) core components or “building blocks”. As a cross-cutting component, leadership and governance provides the basis for the overall policy and regulation of all the other health system blocks. With the projection of labour shortages in healthcare organizations occasioned by mass migration of health professionals, the development of an ingrown talent pool has been identified as a solution to the problem (Rothwell, 2005, 2011). Recruitments to fill leadership vacancies can be drawn from the pool whenever opportunities arise. Succession planning comes in to ensure that the right talents are identified, and required competencies are developed.

Succession management is widely used by both private and public organizations as a means of ensuring stability and continuity during leadership change (Groves, 2018). Every organization inherently faces the challenge of staff movements that would require replacement. This is also true with the public health sector where staff departures are also likely due to several reasons, including career-related movements, infirmity, and retirement. In recent times in Africa, the migration of health workers abroad has also been another attrition factor (Walton-Roberts et al., 2017). Generally, when leaders leave healthcare organizations, this potentially will result to loss of institutional knowledge that will affect the overall change management as well as performance in the organization (Trepanier & Crenshaw, 2013). Mitigating such negative effects on the organization therefore, requires strong leadership. It's therefore evident that, both public and private health care organizations require succession planning as a means of developing a pool of internal candidates that would fill vacant leadership positions when the need arises.

Sierra Leone experienced a 10-year civil war between 1991 and 2001 which left public systems broken and the mass migration of critical health workforce for security and greener pasture. Furthermore, the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone further weakened an already fragile health system (Elston, Moosa, Moses et al., 2016) and reversed health sector gains during the country post-war. The Sierra Leone public health system faces significant challenges due to limited infrastructure and other critical needs. The health workforce represents the backbone of Sierra Leone's health system. There are however persistent gaps in human resource capacity across all cadres, districts and health care levels within the public sector health workforce (Osuteye, Koroma, Macarthy, & Conteh, 2019). According to Sierra Leone Health Labour Market Analysis (SLHLMA), the active stock of health worker- both employed and unemployed (excluding administration and support staff) in Sierra Leone was 11,732 (SLHLMA, 2019) to serve a population of over eight (8) million people. The density of doctors, nurses and midwives is estimated to be 12.3 per 10,000, compared to a global threshold of 45 per 10,000 identified by WHO as generally necessary for the attainment of high level of service coverage compatible with attainment of universal health coverage (UHC) objectives (SLHLMA, 2019). Leadership continuity through effective talent management and retention in human resource constraint settings like the Sierra Leone public health sector has huge potential in addressing the political and economic challenges and ultimately improves the overall health sector performance.

Statement of the Problem

The public sector in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) like Sierra Leone, succession planning practices are limited (Zepeda et al., 2012). The problem, according to Zepeda and colleagues is that, leaders in the public sector rarely identify qualified successors for leadership roles, and this has dire consequences for workplace productivity. The retirement of leaders and the under-utilization of succession planning result in the shortage of critical leaders in the various disciplines of the health sector (Gardner, 2017), and this could potentially affect patients care and efforts to prevent and respond to public health threats. In Sierra Leone, the Ministry of Health (MoH) is the key health service providers in the public sector. The MoH faces health worker shortages due to several reasons, including the numerous pending retirements at age 60 years, and also due to staff leaving the MoH for “greener pastures”, and private practices while others work for health-related NGOs. The longstanding assumption is that, the perceived low remuneration for health professionals in the public sector is the main factor influencing staff attrition. The response then has largely been the reviewing and increasing staff remuneration. Another government’s response to staff shortages is the prompt recruitment of additional staff and the establishment of retention schemes aimed at curbing attrition trends. Also, the staff at the management level in the MoH who have reached retirement age have been retained. The reasons for such retentions are always linked to the challenges of experienced individuals to replace these retirees. There are, however, disadvantages to retaining retired staff in their existing portfolios, and this includes the potential risks of burnout, resistance to change, lack of innovation, poor management, and demotivation of other staff (Uthaman, Chue, & Ang, 2016; Helal, Nobrega & Lima, 2021; Maniar & Mehta, 2022). The current healthcare professional shortages and the high attrition rates inherently threaten the sustainability and efficacy of the Sierra Leone health system.

Organizations such as the Sierra Leone MoH are expected to have policies and manuals that facilitate good succession planning and management practices. However, little is known on the extent to which these policies are being utilized in guiding good succession planning and management practices in the public health sector in Sierra Leone. While the extant research literature is showing progress in the utilization of SPM practices in the public sector, there is limited evidence on succession planning in post-conflict contexts like Sierra Leone. A situation appraisal of the current SPM practices by Kanu (2025) revealed that, SPM practices are lacking or inadequate in the Sierra Leone public health sector. This means, despite the role of SPM in facilitating smooth leadership transition and ensuring continuity (Ali & Mehreen, 2019; Belasen & Belasen, 2016), the concept, according to middle and senior managers, is given little consideration in the public health sector. In essence, succession planning is neither institutionalized nor consistently practiced, despite the critical need for leadership continuity in the Sierra Leone’s fragile public health sector. This affects staff morale and consequently undermine the performance of the MoH (Trepanier & Crenshaw, 2013). Furthermore, the absence of institutionalized SPM practices could be factor responsible for the loss of experienced personnel to the private sector, and migration - the brain drain among health personnel (Najib, Abdullah, Narresh, & Juni, 2019; Qi & Chimenya, 2015). Given this background, it is important to understand the situation of leadership transition within the MoH and provide insightful answers to the research question for this study i.e. What are the factors hindering succession planning and management practices in the MoH?. The findings of this study will contribute towards informing human resource management strategies to ensure

seamless and merit-based leadership transition in the Sierra Leone public health sector. This, by extension, will contribute towards addressing the national economic and political constraints, and ultimately improving social services and population health outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

Human Capital Theory and Signaling Theory have components that involve dimensions of SPM practices such as talent management and career advancement. These theories will provide answers to the research questions for this study.

Human Capital Theory

People bring different levels of education, knowledge, skill, and abilities as well as their expectancy to the workplace. According to McConnellet al.(2009), “a more educated, better-trained person is capable of supplying a larger amount of useful productive effort than one with less education and training,” . The relevance of human capital theory is a focus on the skills, knowledge, and abilities of individuals (De Vos & Dries, 2013) in order to increase organizational performance. Harris et al. (2015) professed opportunities of career growth and the attainment of education, experience, and skills are an advantage of individuals and leaders to leverage human capital increases with a pool of available candidates who meet the criteria to advance the bench strength and productivity of the organization. Alter (2013) and Trepanier and Crenshaw (2013) found it necessary to prepare career-minded individuals for advancement with information of opportunities through interaction with other individuals within the company. Ismail et al. (2014) found organizations who invested in employee career advancement and succession planning experienced favorable employee, financial, and productivity outcomes. The leader’s acknowledgment of the need to develop others, promote upward movement with identified talent, and remove internal or external barriers for success is valid for employee development (Trickel, 2015, Rowold, 2014).

Signaling Theory

Signaling theory is presented as an approach to advance the study of human resource management processes highlighting line managers as signalers of human resource messages and employees as receivers (Guest et al., 2021). Harris et al. (2015) proposed individuals have career goals and develop plans to become successful within a professional field and will signify through training, education, and enhanced capabilities their value to organizations. Clark and Martorell (2014) speculated researchers capitalized on the two theories of signaling and human capital. Employees are internal stakeholders and desire meaningful guidance in career growth and opportunities (Harris et al., 2015). The employee has an awareness of the value of the capabilities within his or her control and seeks opportunities that acknowledge this value and employee branding can highlight organizational sustainability (Clark & Martorell, 2014). Most organization leaders search for individuals for new career opportunities who desire to advance professionally as human capital is an investment for organizational leaders (Harris et al., 2015). Leaders can establish career paths with clarity to understand the career intentions of employees to enhance succession transparency (Granados & Gupta, 2013; Rothwell, 2005). In relation to the public health sector, the leadership responsibility and accountability of leaders in succession planning can have an investment in the benefits and outcome of the sector (Titzer et al., 2014).

The two supporting theories for this study i.e. Human capital and Signaling theories are relevant in promoting SPM practices as schematically presented in the figure 1 below. Whereas human capital theory assumes that education determines the marginal productivity of labour which ultimately determines earnings (Marginson, 2019) the signaling theory emphasize perceptions of career opportunities through capacity enhancement in line with the values of their organizations (Harris et al., 2015)

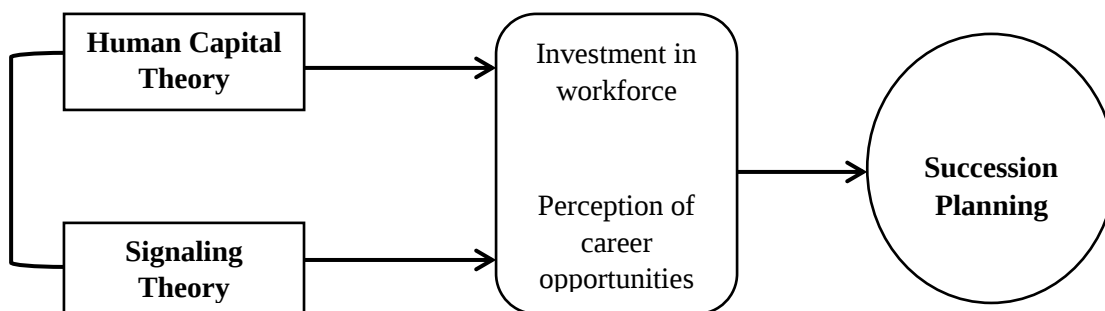


Figure 1: Supporting Theories and Succession Planning

Theoretical Review

The terminology “succession planning” has many definitions that have been used to describe it in terms of a proactive process to identify, assess and develop and replace individuals for future leadership positions through a process of mentorship and education that provides continuity for an organization (Phillips, 2019). Initially, succession planning was commonly defined as a process to move employees into leadership positions (Hannon, 2014) or as intentionally identifying, developing, and retaining individuals for future management and leadership roles (Rothwell, 2005). As the term evolved, so did the need to expand its interpretation. Human resources professionals have interpreted it to mean “talent management” or “career self-awareness” (Clutterbuck, 2010), and other definitions include a business plan for the replacement of retiring organizational members (Hank, 2006). Renowned succession researchers have defined succession planning as an activity that an organization undertakes to prepare, train, preserve, and successfully transition staff into position when vacancies occur (Darnell & Campbell, 2015; Santora et al., 2015). It is not an activity that can happen in a vacuum; instead, it should be viewed as an intensive and comprehensive initiative that helps ensure that a well-trained cadre of leaders is available to step in where and when the need arises (Cole, 2015). Farah (2019) recognized that succession planning should not be an isolated event managed only by Human Resources (HR) or the board of directors. Instead, it is a complex process that should be taken seriously and carefully orchestrated. Thus, it may work best when the involvement of its activities is common and beneficial to the organization at large and not just H.R. and the board of directors. Succession planning is a dynamic and necessary part of leadership development within an organization that assures the seamless functioning of vital programs in the event of planned or unplanned vacancies (Rothwell, 2005).

The literature revealed numerous studies regarding succession planning for for-profit organizations and less depth on nonprofit organizations, including the public sector. One of the most critical factors for succession planning is an organization’s ability to prepare for operational continuity of essential leadership positions during transitions. Current literature

suggests that succession planning is a critical component for public health organizations and entities to develop, in addition to developing and training a talent pool of professionals ready to step in when vacancies occur (Rothwell, 2005; 2010). It is also a strategic process that lends itself to the knowledge transfer of skills and expertise from one generation to the next while maintaining organizational stability. One of the benefits of succession planning is when done well, it has that inherent ability to create a healthy organization with financial stability and improved morale that thrives on decreased turnover costs because of strategic planning built into the succession plan for employee retention (Darnell & Campbell, 2015). As a result, the organization experiences better operational continuity and have a strengthened workforce pipeline with a talent pool ready to assume the positions when turnovers occur (Sellers et al., 2015). Frequent and unplanned leadership turnover often creates turbulence within the organization and staff, and the population served experiences adverse outcomes as a result of the organization's destabilization (Kesner & Sebor, 1994; Santora & Sarros, 1995). Unexpected transitions are labor-intensive on the organization and community and compromise funding and established relationships with partners and collaborators, contributing to an unhealthy working environment. There may not be one solid way to identify and implement succession planning for public health organizations because different organizations have different structures. This needs to be taken into consideration when developing a succession plan. However, since the private (for-profit) sector is ahead on succession planning, the lessons learned can be applied to the roadmap developed for public sector agencies, including public health.

Empirical Review

In comparison with the private sector, it is widely reported that public sector lags behind the private sector in the aspect of succession planning (Zepeda et al., 2012). Several factors have been reported to account for this difference and this includes organizational culture, costs associated in implementing succession strategies (Trepanier & Crenshaw, 2013; Zepeda et al., 2012). Succession planning has a critical role not only on business continuity, but also in ensuring the performance of an organization. In the absence of succession planning, organizational performance will be undermined as the wrong people are sometimes placed in positions that they do not deserve (Dood & Simons, 2005). The lack of succession planning also will affect the overall staff morale and retention when succession is not merit-based (Ali & Mehreen, 2019). Succession management therefore ensures organizations appropriately plan to replace individuals that may leave the organization in the future.

Pila, Schlitz and Dachapali (2016), adopted a quantitative study design, to determine the factors related to succession planning in a public sector department in Gauteng, South. Their findings revealed a lack of a clear succession plan and commitment to ethical human resources management practices were among the factors identified by the authors.

Arimie, Eghaghe and Osaluwe (2022) work used qualitative data which was which was collected from secondary sources to examine the issue of management development and succession planning in the Nigerian public service, with emphasis on the need for mentorship in the public service. Their findings revealed that, the Nigerian public service has no visible operational management development programs that promote sustainable succession planning.

Mitalo and Aleu (2025) research study in South Sudan was conducted to determine how succession planning practices influence employee performance in the Ministry of Public

Service. Whereas adequate SPM practices are rare, especially in Africa, their findings on succession planning practices in the public service were rated as moderately positive. The status of SPM practices in South Sudan is encouraging, albeit the need for improvement to ensure an effective system that supports leadership transition in the public sector.

Research Gap

The extant literature on succession planning in Africa for example focuses largely on stable countries. Considering the impact of civil war on a country's governance system, little is known about how fragile and post-conflict contexts are managing succession planning. To address this gap, Sierra Leone, which experienced a decade-long war (1991-2001), offers a unique opportunity to evaluate SPM practices as part of post-war public sector governance reforms. The findings aimed to inform health system strengthening initiatives towards building a resilient national health system and to provide insights applicable in fragile health systems and post-conflict settings.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Study Population

This was a qualitative cross-sectional study conducted between April 2024 and May 2024. The target population is middle and senior managers within the civil service between Grades 9 and 14 in the MoH, and this comprises healthcare professionals and administrative staff. These officials are targeted because of their roles in managing leadership gaps and development in the ministry. Participants were drawn only from the national level.

Participants' Recruitment, Data Collection, Analysis

A combination of convenience and purposive sampling strategies was used. Convenience sampling was used because each of the potential participants is a staff of the MoH. However, these individuals have also been identified and selected purposively because of the positions they hold in the ministry, which provide them knowledge of and experience with the topic of the study (Robinson, 2014). A total of eighteen (18) participants who met the selection criteria were interviewed, allowing the succession planning issue to be framed from the unique perspective of both professional and administrative middle and senior level managers of the MoH. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. All interviews were recorded with the permission of participants. For the analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step framework for performing thematic analysis was followed, which involves six steps: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes and producing a report. An inductive process was used to analyze the interview transcripts and the field notes. The MAXQDA 22 software was used for the text coding and storage.

RESULTS

The research question for this study is "What are the factors hindering succession planning and management practices in the MoH?". For this research question, the aim is to investigate the key factors affecting the effective implementation of succession planning in the MoH. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted among eighteen (18) purposively selected middle and senior managers of the MoH.

Table 1: Distribution of the Demographic Characteristics of the Interview Participants (n=18)

Demographic Data		Frequency
Gender	Male	10
	Female	8
Profession	Medical Doctors	4
	Nurses	6
	Allied Health Professionals (AHP)	4
	Administrative staff	4
Grade	Grade 9-10	4
	Grade 11-12	10
	Grade 13-14	4

Among the participants, the majority, 56% (n=10), are male. Nurses formed the majority, accounting for 33.3% (n=6) among the professional cadres, and four (4) representatives each for medical doctors, allied health professionals, and administrative staff. Fifty-five (55) percent of the participants were between grades 11 and 12.

Based on the interviews and extracted data, critical barriers that hinder succession planning were identified in three main themes: (1) Politics and nepotism (2) weak performance evaluation mechanism and (3) lack of resources/costs

Theme 1: Politics and Nepotism

Politics dominated participants' perceived barriers to the implementation of succession planning and management in the MoH. Politically-connected appointments and postings were cited by nearly all the participants as affecting leadership transition and the overall operation of the MoH.

"In MoH, politics is eating badly the health profession. You know what, it does not matter your qualifications or experience; it pleases those in power to determine who become a manager or director in this ministry. This is really affecting performance as many people are left demotivated" **(Male, Medical doctor)**.

"This politics is breaking our ministry. When government changes, professionals perceived as having relationship with the outgoing party are badly treated, stalling their growth to the top management level, and sometimes even transferred or sent to early retirement". **(Female, Nurse)**

"My friend, I am a victim of politics in this ministry. I was badly treated because of politics, but thank God I am here today. Politics has been played not today but for years and individuals are punished because of politics, regional and tribal reasons. This is really not good and it is negatively affecting professionalism and staff morale". **(Female, Nurse)**

"[My position] this is a politically-appointed position. Yes, I have deputies who are closely working with me. But at the end of the day, the appointment of the person to succeed me comes from the political leadership and not my recommendation". **(Male, Medical Doctor)**

Alongside politics, some participants cited nepotism, tribalism and ethnicity as playing significant roles in hindering good succession planning and management practices in the MoH and the wider civil service.

“In Sierra Leone, getting a job in the civil service generally is determined by tribal and regional considerations on who succeed who. You will hear questions like where is he/she from? Which political party does he/she belong?. To be honest, these have become the issues rather than who is actually suitable for the post. What is happening not only in MoH but the wider public sector is largely supercession and not succession”.

(Male, Administrative Staff)

“You cannot believe it, when a new party comes to power; most of those at the top are changed. Those who are brought in, they will end up recruiting and promoting individuals that come from their region or their political party” **(Female, Nurse).**

“Ones career growth in the MoH depends on the party in power. When your party is in power, you can be promoted or posted to a lucrative area, regardless of your experience. So to me, it is about who you know and who knows you”. **(Male, Allied Health Professional)**

Theme 2: Weak Performance Evaluation Mechanism

Succession is informed by the products of effective human resource performance monitoring and evaluation. In the MoH, there is a performance evaluation mechanism but the process and quality are considered inadequate by most of the participants. Some of them even stated that, the performance evaluation is not countenanced during promotion or succession. Rather other factors, such as politics and nepotism are considered.

“My understanding about succession or promotion generally, annual performance report should be used to determine staff performance year in and year out so that the leadership appreciate staff upward movement. But the way the evaluations are done, they are compromised and probably that is a reason the leadership in the MoH or HRMO hardly consider those evaluation reports during promotions” **(Female, Administrative Staff)**

“Of course, the ministry has an annual performance evaluation scheme for staff from grades 9 upwards. Yes, we are expecting these evaluations to determine who is to be promoted or not. Maybe the leadership looks at them but what I have seen over the years, poor performers are elevated at the expense of good and committed individuals based on their relationship with the leadership or political connections”. **(Male, Medical Doctor)**

“I agree that annual performance evaluations are done but in many occasion, they are not considered for promotion. In fact, some people only need them when they want to proceed on annual leave or study leave as requirements for leave applications **(Male, Administrative Staff)**

Theme 3: Lack of Resources and Cost of Implementing SPM

Succession is expected to be a continuous issue in the civil service, and the recruitment to fill vacancies has a lot to do with availability of funds. Apparently, staff promotion is associated with salary increase and other welfare benefits. As such succession planning has cost implications and faces challenges in resource-poor settings like Sierra Leone. The issue of cost

as barrier to the implementation of succession planning in the MoH was cited by a few participants.

“There is a huge cost associated with staff promotion and it is a concern to the government. The government is struggling with the wage bill and any attempt to promote staff on a yearly basis will add huge pressure on the wage bill”. **(Male, Administrative Staff).**

“I don’t think the government has enough money to manage succession as effectively as expected. This is not only in our ministry [MoH] but the entire public sector” **(Male, Administrative Staff).**

“On a yearly basis, vacancies are supposed to be filled, but this is not the case most times. The government may consider the funding challenges, and as such refuse to fill vacancies and thus affecting not only succession planning but also service delivery”. **(Male, Medical Doctor)**

Discussions

Although succession planning appears easy to implement in theory, there are multiple problems in practice (Tabatabaee, Lakeh, & Tadi, 2014). Planning and applying succession planning is inherently not an easy process. There might be many barriers and difficulties, which would delay the initiation of the process and slow it down. These barriers and obstacles to succession planning are different and depend on organizational culture, strategy, and economic conditions (Shatilwe & Amukugo, 2016). The current study explored the factors hindering the implementation of good succession planning and management practices in the MoH. According to the findings, the participants’ perceived factors for the ineffective implementation of succession planning and management in MoH are captured in 3 main themes as follows: (1) Politics and nepotism (2) weak performance evaluation mechanism and (3) lack of resources/costs

Politics and nepotism: Appointment processes are integral to the performance of an organisation and its staff, with competent people needing to be appointed and to have their performance valued and assessed appropriately. In the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health, the findings of this study revealed that appointments, especially for top leadership positions are often done on the basis of staff personal political relations more than on their competence. Other related factors cited by participants of undermining succession planning include tribalism and ethnicity; as individuals are promoted or employed in MoH based on their district or region of origin. The findings of this study is in concurrence with Konateh, Duramany-Lakkoh, and Udeh (2023) study findings on the selection practices on public service delivery in public sector institutions in Sierra Leone. The deep politicisation of human resources was found as a major challenge at the public service commission; and that recruitment and selection procedures tend to conflict with the requirement of ethic representativeness especially on Mende and Temne tribal sentiment. Political, tribal, and regional appointments were vividly captured in the 2018 Government of Sierra Leone (GoSL) Governance Transition Team (GTT) Report (GoSL, 2018). The report documented governance issues among other considerations following the change of government in 2018, from the All People Congress (APC) Party to the Sierra Leone People’s Party (SLPP). The GTT report noted that, the outgone APC Government pursued a policy of ‘tribalism’ and regionalism in its recruitment and promotion of personnel in Government agencies. The situation in the previous APC government in relation to political

and tribal appointments persists in the current SLPP government as revealed by the current study on SPM practices in the MoH. Furthermore, the study findings are consistent with a study on the factors influencing succession planning in the Namibia's Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (Shatilwe & Amukugo; 2016), where politics was found to greatly undermine succession planning in the ministry. Tribalism and ethnicity were also reported in the Nigerian civil service as adversely affecting succession planning (Ataire, Mark, & Mbon, 2024). The findings are also consistent with a study by Orga and Ogbo (2012) in evaluating the human resources management in Nigeria where they noted political interference in the human resource management.

The political appointment of bureaucrats - or patronage, in short- is ubiquitous throughout the developing world (Grindle, 2012). Patronage is typically understood as a rent-seeking strategy in which politicians build and maintain clientelistic networks and steer bureaucratic efforts for political and/or private gain, which hurts development (Toral, 2021). Political patronage in public sector employment and appointment come with costs and notably include distorting the allocation of public jobs and disincentivize bureaucratic performance (Xu, 2018; Tsako, 2020). While patronage comes with costs, Toral (2021) highlighted the benefits associated with political appointments. He argues that political appointments and connections provide bureaucrats with "upward embeddedness", i.e., social and political connections with politicians, which facilitate bureaucratic accountability and effectiveness. Toral furthered that, patronage gives bureaucrats access to material and non-material resources, facilitates monitoring by politicians, enables the application of sanctions and rewards, aligns priorities and incentives, and increases mutual trust. In certain conditions, he noted, patronage can make bureaucrats more accountable and effective at public service delivery. Toral however acknowledges that patronage is not universally good, nor that it comes without costs. According to him, patronage may, for example, lead to the selection of bureaucrats with less education and experience. This ultimately undermines health system performance, with dire implications on service delivery and population health outcomes.

Succession planning is an important tool used in ensuring leadership continuity. As noted, by Weisblat (2018), all organizations have one thing in common. At a certain point, they must deal with shifts of leadership, culture, politics, decision-making, power, and strategies for improvement. According to Weisblat, organizations with clearly developed succession plans are the most successful in this transition, regardless of the industry, business model, or type of ownership. His views were empirically supported by the work of Gontur and colleagues (2025) on the relationship between succession planning and employee retention in public and private organizations in Nigeria. Their findings confirm a positive connection between succession planning and employee retention, signifying that organisations that apply succession planning are more likely to keep their employees. The current study has highlighted the influence of politics and nepotism on leadership transition in the Sierra Leone public health sector. According to the Signaling Theory, leaders are expected to establish career paths and enhance succession transparency by ensuring that employees have clear understanding on their career pathways and guided accordingly (Granados & Gupta, 2013). The influence of politics and tribalism ultimately affect employees' perceptions of career progression, and these practices potentially undermine institutional trust, leadership legitimacy, and staff morale within the MoH. The current findings, in the form of perceptions, are significant but equivocal concerning

public sector appointments in Sierra Leone being subject to considerable political influence in ways that impact negatively on succession planning and organizational performance.

Weak performance Evaluation: A performance appraisal or evaluation is an approach whereby the work efficiency of a worker is documented and examined (Ali, Mahmood & Mehreen, 2019; Durst & Bruns, 2016). Performance appraisal, when done accordingly with staff feedback, it ensures that the performance is always high and improving which greatly helps to make a better succession planning. In the Sierra Leone Ministry of Health, the perceptions of middle and senior managers is that, performance evaluation is fraught with challenges, including lack of appropriate criteria, interference by politicians and other highly placed individuals, and the overall quality is perceived as poor. Other public sector institutions in Sierra Leone have also found to be deficient in performance management systems similar to the MoH as revealed in this study. In Harvey and Bendu (2021) study on the determinants of state institutions performance in Sierra Leone, respondents emphatically stated that the reason for such failure is because institutions lack proper systems that ensure effective monitoring mechanisms. The lack of clear and appropriate criteria for performance appraisal of staff was also found to be a key factor affecting the implementation of succession planning in the Namibia health system (Shatilwe & Amukugo, 2016). In addition to its negative implications on succession planning, issues of ambiguity, injustice and mismatching of feedback that are associated with weak performance appraisal mechanism have been found to negatively affect organizational performance. They can have a negative effect on job satisfaction, work engagement, and productivity (Brown, Hyatt & Benson, 2010; Bekele, Shigutu & Tensay, 2014). Performance appraisal, according to evidence has a positive impact on succession planning if implemented accordingly (Ahmad, Keerio, Jameel, & Karem, 2020). The current situation in Sierra Leone public health sector shows weak performance evaluation mechanism which is a critical element highlighted in the Human Capital Theory. The lack of an effective performance appraisal system in the public health sector hinders talent recognition and development, and hence affects leadership continuity in the MoH.

Lack of resources and costs: Barriers to succession planning in the public sector go beyond hiring or promotional-related issues, and can include financial crisis and or existing budgetary constraints; preventing more consideration to the needs of succession planning and management. The lack of adequate budgetary allocations to manage succession in the MoH has been cited as hindrance to effective implementation of succession planning. The findings are consistent with studies in Nigeria (Atairet, Mark, & Mbon, 2024) and Namibia (Shatilwe & Amukugo, 2016) where poor financial availability was found as critically affecting succession planning in public sector. Succession is inherently associated with staff compensation for staff assuming new posts; and evidence has demonstrated that compensation has a positive impact on succession planning (Ali, Mahmood, & Mehreen, 2019; Kim Young, 2020). Compensation makes the employees more motivated and comfortable which greatly help to make a better succession planning (Aziz et al., 2019; Duthler & Dhanesh, 2018). Insufficient funding remains a major factor that limits support for broad workforce development activities, specifically for the formal implementation of succession planning (Harper et al., 2018) in both public and private sectors. This underscores the critical need to advocate for dedicated resources to support succession planning and management in the public health sector.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Leadership is an essential health sector practice which can have a direct impact on clinical and organisational outcomes and an indirect effect on all other elements of the operational environment. The need to develop high-performing leaders through an effective succession planning is important if the vision for transforming the Sierra Leone public health sector is to be realised. The findings of this study point to a severe crisis in public health management capacity, driven by the lack of a structured system to develop and retain future leaders. Generally, the study highlighted the following: **Leadership and Governance Deficit:** Effective public health management relies on strong, competent leadership at all levels. The lack of an effective succession management system creates a vacuum in management capacity, weakening the MoH's ability to coordinate, implement, and evaluate public health programs effectively. **Erosion of Management Systems:** The weak performance evaluation mechanism identified in the study is a fundamental management failure. When performance appraisals are flawed and not linked to promotions, it dismantles accountability, demotivates staff, and removes any objective basis for management decisions regarding career advancement. **Operational and Financial Inefficiency:** The lack of dedicated resources for SPM reflects poor financial management and a short-term perspective. The cost of not planning - frequent leadership crises, loss of institutional knowledge, poor staff morale, and constant external recruitment- is likely far higher than the investment in developing internal talent. This inefficiency undermines the return on investment in the health sector. It is expected that this study will generate discussion within MoH and its partners on the importance of succession planning as part of health system strengthening efforts in Sierra Leone.

Recommendations

Succession planning has become one of the most significant human resource management responsibilities within today's public and private organizations. Organizations, including the public health sector, cannot afford to attract, invest in, and then lose its high potential employees. Retaining and developing potential employees is critical for the growth and performance of the Sierra Leone public health sector through effective succession planning and management practices. Based on the findings, the study recommends the following:

- **Integrate SPM into National Strategy:** The government must formally incorporate succession planning into the national health sector strategic plan and the broader public sector reform agenda.
- **Foster a culture of merit-based appointments:** Policies must be strengthened and enforced to curb political interference, nepotism, and tribalism in appointments, ensuring that promotions are based on competence and performance.
- **Decentralize HRH Management:** A shift from "deconcentration" to true "decentralization" would empower District Health Management Teams (DHMTs) to better manage performance and identify local leadership talent, making the system more responsive
- **Invest in Management Capacity:** Public health managers must be trained and equipped to mentor and coach their staff. The budget for staff training and leadership development must be protected and viewed as a critical investment, not an optional expense.

- **Assess impact and costs of succession planning:** Further studies are recommended to assess the impact and costs on health-related outcomes associated with succession planning in the public health sector.

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