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Conflict Within International Nonprofit Development Organisations: Expressions, Origins, Capabilities and Remedies

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Abstract

It is anticipated that growing turbulence in operating environments for international civil society organisations (ICSO) will increase organisational stress and troubles. However, little is known about their capability to translate internal conflict into positive organisational outcomes. An original empirical study therefore investigated the profile and origins of intra-organisational conflict and the extent to which they are a source of innovation and capacity improvement associated with for-profit enterprises. This article presents major findings of this study. Conclusions include: ICSOs exhibit behavioural sensibilities, such as mission-passion, as well as internal pre-dispositions that work against realizing the gains that intra-organisational conflict could offer. For functional conflicts to enhance performance conditions must be right, which is seldom in play. Suggestions for what this can mean in terms of remedy to establish a healthy conflict perspective (HCP) are provided, which will require testing by action research.

Key words: international NGOs, internal conflict, conflict management, morale, performance

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INTRODUCTION

The research described in this paper resulted from the confluence of two issues: first, are questions concerning the effect of externally induced disruptions on civil society organisations in a world of seemingly increasing turbulence and complexity. Second, the researchers' interest in the nature and effects of intra-organisational conflict on a particular type of civil society organisation – nongovernmental civil society organisations dedicated to international relief and development (ICSOs). When viewed together, along with other trends, the question arises: does intra-organisational conflict reduce the ability of civil society organizations to gain from turbulence, and remain effective? Several other factors highlighted the importance of this question. These included: uncertainty and turbulence becoming the new normal for organisations in all sectors (e.g., McBride, Dobuzinski and Cohen. M, 2012); ICSOs facing greater scrutiny to demonstrate performance and effectiveness; and lastly the fact that intra-organisational conflict in non-profit organisations in general remains relatively unexplored, in contrast to different types of organisational conflict in the market sector.

Our particular interest is in ICSOs that span multiple countries of operation, which can be assumed to inherently complicate both the sources of conflict and ways in which this energy can be harvested to increase capabilities and improve performance. For the sake of simplicity, the organisations we had in mind included, but are not limited to, household names, such as Action Aid, Care, Oxfam and Plan International, Medecins sans Frontiers and World Vision.⁴

Terminology and Definitions

To help focus the unit of study, we understand **intra-organisational conflict** as an actual or perceived incompatibility of opinions, styles, perspectives, goals or actions with effects that gain the organisation's attention beyond its original location or event. Some studies dedicated to this organisational topic limit the use of conflict to very high levels of discord. Our use covers a broad spectrum of intra organisational issues– from creative differences to high stakes and intense disputes. The initiative does not include conflict with third parties outside the organisation and therefore in this article we use the terms “intra-organisational conflict” and “conflict” interchangeably.

⁴ Members of the INGDO Accountability Charter are indicative of this field.
<http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/>

When reference is made to **conflict management system**, we are referring to organisational systems of at least a modest level of formality that include both perspectives and tools for responding to and learning from intra-organisational conflict. These systems often include preventive measures, such as training as well as conflict resolution approaches— such as ombuds, facilitation, a grievance system, dispute review panels and mediation. SPIDR (the now defunct Society for Professionals in Dispute Resolution) describes conflict management systems as follows:

Integrated conflict management systems go beyond the introduction of rights-based grievance procedures and interest-based mediation programs...An integrated conflict management system introduces and focuses on other tools of conflict management – referral, listening, anonymous problem identification and consultation, coaching, mentoring, informal problem solving, direct negotiation, informal shuttle diplomacy, generic solutions and systems change..(SPIDR, 2001: 8))

A Working Hypothesis

An exploratory workshop with staff of large ICSOs, our collective experience and practical observations provided a working hypothesis that conflict is intrinsic in the organisational experience of ICSOs, but hard/functional and soft/cultural conditions within them seldom enable the potential benefits inherent in conflict to be gained. However, should they so commit, ICSOs can capitalize on conflict in ways that need to be tailored to their missions and circumstances. Effective organisational responses to conflict in ICSOs will not be a cut and paste from for-profits, but they can adopt some relatively simple concepts to make the needed changes in their organisations and benefit from conflict. A benefit of working effectively with conflict (conflict competence) will help ICSOs better respond to disruptive forces. help them better respond to disruptive forces. Additionally, we believe that there has, until now, been almost no information about or a coherent picture of conflict in ICSO community.

The paper begins with a discussion on what is known about conflict as an organisational issue. In doing so, concepts are established and gaps in the existing literature are identified, which the study seeks to address. Section three introduces the research methods, including delineation of the ISCO population we had in mind and the difficulties in doing so, particularly across multiple legal jurisdictions. Section four presents the data collected. The major findings of the research are presented in section five, while section six provides tentative conclusions.

CONFLICT AS AN ORGANISATIONAL REALITY

From the perspective of contingency theories of organisational behavior (Newstrom, Reif and Monczka, 1975; Wood, 1979) this section explores what is understood by and known about conflict in relation to organisations in general and non-profits in particular. It establishes mechanisms linking external turbulence to internal troubles.

The nature of conflict in organisations

There is a wealth of literature on conflict management in for-profit organisations, however the evidence relied on is often limited to one country, seldom looking transnationally. This analytic situation could be because ownership arrangements and sites of authority are contractually well-established, with sanctions well understood not necessitating such enquiry. In comparison, the literature examining conflict within non-profit organisations is sparse at best and virtually non-existent for those that work in multiple national jurisdictions with devolved structures allowing for local governance and authority explained later. Perforce, the literature informing our work and this paper is based on studies and research in a for-profit context.

One body of literature invites researchers in this field to differentiate between, primarily, *task conflict* (or functional conflict)- defined as differences in ideas, opinions, viewpoints and task content - and *relationship conflict* (or dysfunctional conflict) - defined as tensions, annoyances, disagreements and personal incompatibilities over matters such as beliefs, values, habits and personalities (Shaw, et al 2011 :391). Task conflict has been shown to be positively linked to performance while relationship conflict is negatively associated with performance. Relationship conflict increases the cognitive load and therefore decreases the ability to think flexibly, effectively diverting human resources. The for-profit literature goes on to posit that functional conflict has potential benefits for an organization. Numerous studies are dedicated to determining what these benefits are and how they are obtained (Shaw, et al 2011; DeChurch, et al 2013; DeDreu 2007, Jehn, et al 2001).

A further nuanced examination, which includes *process conflict*, goes further to suggest that:

.... Task conflict “deepens group members’ understanding of the issues at hand. Greater disagreement means that many more perspectives will emerge. (Levy, Paluck and Cikara, 2013: 6)

In fact, too little task conflict has been shown to foster stagnation, leading to:

inactivity and avoidance, neglect of information and low joint performance” (Robbins, 1991; De Dreu 2006). Moderate task conflict energizes teams by yielding differing opinions, solutions, motivations and perspective [additionally] moderate task conflict creates a situation in which teams not only vet ideas thoroughly but develop new associations and combinations of information. (Shaw et al 2011: 392).

Alternatively, a 2007 review of the literature presents a different perspective, positing that both task and relationship conflict can harm performance, while outlining a set of conditions or circumstances where performance (related to innovation and decision quality) is enhanced by conflict. The circumstances outlined include the following: that conflicts should be task-related; should not involve issues related to personality, identity, religious values, humor or political ideologies; should be of moderate intensity; and there should be high levels of trust, psychological safety (De Dreu, 2007: 9). However, a 2013 meta-analysis offers an expanded perspective where the authors find that functional conflict does benefit performance and suggest that conflict processes (also referred to as “conflict management”) are a determinant as to whether the conflict has a positive impact on performance.

Research suggests that the process through which teams interact in relation to conflict affects their functioning (Behfar, Peterson, Mannix and Trochim, 2008; Thomas, 1992). For example, collectivist processes have been associated with enhanced performance and increased concern for team members... Similarly, collaborative approaches to resolve conflict in a way that is mutually beneficial to the parties involved (Thomas, 1992; Tjosvold, 1991) therefore restoring fairness perceptions, improving process effectiveness, repairing working relationships... collectivist conflict process is positively related to both performance and affective outcomes (DeChurch et al, 2013: 566).

The cited studies do not examine the impacts of task or relational conflict on the whole organization (or across multiple sites of the organisation). However, from the studies, it is reasonable to argue that linking task conflict with improved performance and relationship conflict with poorer performance are applies in a broader organisational setting as there are organisation-wide implications for these findings. Healthy, task conflict, when the conditions are not right in the organisation, can quickly escalate and become destructive conflict, risking escalation impacting the whole organisation beyond the original site of the inter-personal conflict. Researchers have identified the conditions for healthy conflict and these include:

promoting open debate at moderate levels if measures are taken to prevent and minimize inter-personal conflict. Team leaders, managers, and other decision makers may realize higher

performance and greater satisfaction benefits by fostering respectful attitudes, providing guidelines for recognizing destructive conflict spirals, and communicating the differences between constructive and destructive conflicts during conflict-management training (Shaw, 2011: 398)

Addressing conflict is important – avoiding or denying it can lead to destructive outcomes. Active management of the conflict is key.

There is, however, a wealth of for-profit literature on organisational conflict management systems that does address conflict and the impact of conflict on the whole organisation. This literature argues that conflict management systems (also called integrated conflict management systems) are a holistic and effective way to ensure that expressions of conflict, from inter-personal to inter-group, from task to relational, do not become destructive. The essential elements of a healthy and effective conflict management system include the predominance of interest-based options (as opposed to rights and power-based options), emphasis on training and skills, a dedicated and inclusive design process. (e.g., Constantino and Merchant, 1996) Additionally,

... increased trust can facilitate constructive responses (Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998).

Employee empowerment and work design can increase employees active responses to conflict (Mishra and Spreitzer, 1998). The ability of employees to express their concerns upward in the organizational hierarchy, which is called employee voice, also is an important factor in shaping how employees perceive fairness or justice in the organization, which in turn influences how they respond to conflict (Sheppar, Lewicki and Minton, 1992; Sitkin and Bies, 1993). Conberre, (2001: 234).

Conflict management systems ensure that there are integrated parts working on conflict and that there are built-in mechanisms designed to enable learning in the system so that the organization can respond and take action to prevent destructive conflict.

Conflict in the context of federations and alliances in turbulent environments

For-profit management literature argues that external turbulence adds to organisational uncertainty which, in turn, generates internal anxiety, feeding differences in views and disagreements (Luhman and Cunliffe, 2012). In theorizing the types of power deployed by organisations to gain compliant employee behaviour, Etzioni (1971) posits that non-profits are normatively oriented, attracting individuals motivated by value-commitment and ‘passion’, suggesting predispositions to engage emotively with internal turbulence. Haslam’s (2001)

perspective elaborates on such a predisposition in terms of a pro-social ethos in employee social identity. With strong bonding to the ICSO mission comes expectations of a right to a claim-making participatory ‘voice’ in its working and decisions. While the issue of voice in relation to fairness is reflected in the for-profit literature, a sense of being a co-owner of an ICSO can result in greater disappointment if this expectation is not met. One can therefore reasonably anticipate an increase in turbulence–related, intra-organisational conflicts, calling for responses that do not debilitate, but actually improve organisational resilience and effectiveness of development programmes and efforts.

In an expanded perspective (Scott and Meyer, 1991) argue that a combined evolution of modern societies and modern organisations generates an increasing incidence of conflicting institutional demands. ICSOs encounter these dual co-evolutionary pressures that often play out in highly decentralised, multi-cultural organisational set ups with contending stakeholder expectations and measures of success (Pache and Santos, 2010; Costa, et al, 2012). That is, the intra-organisational conflict terrain within which management agency must be applied is permeated by tensions between centralisation and fragmentation as well as by complex performance metrics making assessment of consequence of conflict (in)action very difficult to estimate. Understanding such a scenario in practice was the object of study explained in the following section.

THE RESEARCH

Based primarily on market sector research and findings, we concluded from the literature review, that these works would not fully enable us to answer pertinent questions concerning the nature and extent of intra-organisational conflict on ICSOs given the substantial distinctions of mission, vision and organisational character. The following section describes the type of questions or concerns that shaped the methods deployed across the ICSO community that is practically impossible to delineate in a robust way, discussed after.

The literature gap

We recognize that any collection of people working collectively toward common goals will encounter internal conflict. As such, there are common forms of conflict encountered in all collective action, whether business sector, government or civil society. Although there is substantial research on intra-organizational conflict, there are far fewer studies exploring intra-organizational conflict and collaboration (Dean 2010: 2).

As a general statement, collections of working humans will necessarily have similar features, including in organisational conflict. However, we are aware of the substantial distinctions between ICSOs working in development and other organizations of the business or government sector, for example in terms of the logics they rely on: capital accumulation in the former and regulation of the public sphere in the latter (Alford and Friedland, 1993). With respect to intra-organisational conflict, the literature did not adequately explain such differences. Additionally, the dearth of literature on conflict in the ICSOs did not provide a coherent picture of conflict in the sector. Consequently, we decided that to ascertain the landscape of conflict in civil society organisations, it was preferable to make a direct assessment rather than mechanically applying the literature or research on organisational conflict in the business sector. We recognise, however, that other organisations, perhaps such as in the public provision of social services of education or health, may have similarities with civil society organisations.

The gap in literature concerning for organisational conflict and ICSO's raised a number of questions in the researchers' minds as follows:

1. What is the nature of intra-organisational Conflict in ICSOs?
2. What is the ability of ICSOs to respond to moderate to severe Conflict?
3. What are the effects of Conflict on ICSOs?
4. What is the ability of or limits on ICSOs to gain a benefit or upside of Conflict?
5. Whether and to what extent ICSOs used Conflict Management Systems
6. Are there other benefits realized from a more thoughtful approach to conflict?

In efforts to respond to these questions, we conducted a survey of ICSOs in an effort to assess the character, extent, and effects of intra-organisational conflict. Our expressed goal was to explore the landscape of intra organisational conflict in those organisations working internationally as members of the broader civil society.

The ICSO population and the survey

The literature about ICSOs is plagued with inconsistencies in defining the organisational field, a problem exacerbated by the arrival, in the nineteen nineties of the concept of civil society to which this community belong (Fowler, 2011). The mix up of labels – as analytic categories – is compounded by inconsistency in legal definitions across multiple jurisdictions which further complicates a robust enumeration (Bloodgood, Tremblay-Boire and Prakash, 2014). The approach to defining the survey population was necessarily pragmatic. It relied on self-

definition of ICSOs based on their membership of a national umbrella organisation recognized for its (national) function in the international aid system. In other words, no attempt was made to define a statistically relevant sample population from which firm extrapolations could be made. Rather, comparisons of the distribution of respondents' organisational data against secondary literatures on scale of operation and employees, distributions of financial resources (e.g., Tomlinson, 2013; DI, 2014) was used to assess the degree to which the sample was a reasonable representation, explained below.

Several umbrella organisations assisted our efforts in distributing an online survey ICSO members. Access to respondents was sought by invitations to participate distributed through ICSO umbrella organisations in Australia, Canada, the European Union and the United States of America. The online survey used the Typeform survey tool and contained thirty six questions, both qualitative and quantitative.

Over 100 ICSO respondents located in 23 countries provided survey information (to which we refer in this paper collectively as “respondents”). Two-thirds of the respondents were from the perspective of a head office, 15 came from country or affiliate offices, 23 from observers and five which were indeterminate. Of the 47 respondents providing job titles, four are board members; 25 are senior management including CEOs, Vice Presidents and Directors; nine are managers; with nine as programme staff and other categories. The bulk of respondents are in functions with an overall view of the topic. Their data was reviewed manually and an IT consultant assisted in providing visual graphic and aggregate summaries.

Recognizing the topic of intra-organisational conflict may be quite sensitive within an organisation, the survey was designed to permit respondent anonymity. This came with a cost, in that this feature limits an ability to arrive at a definitive profile of all respondents or their organisations. Nonetheless, the multiple types of information requested, ICSO literature (e.g., Ronalds, 2010; Green, 2015) together with inputs from knowledgeable observers creates a reasonable landscape from which, for example, to view ways ahead in terms of improving effectiveness discussed in Section six.

Table 1. ICSO - number of countries of on-the-ground presence

Country Presence (n=76)	1-20 Countries	21-50 Countries	51-100 Countries	>100 Countries
Number of ICSOs	26 (34%)	26 (34%)	16 (21%)	8 (10%)

The ICSO community is characterised by a diversity of organisational arrangements that span centralisation to different degrees of relative autonomy within a ‘family’ tied to a common brand (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001). The profile of organisational arrangements of respondents is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Type of ICSO

ICSO Type (n=93)	Number (%)
Loose coalition	5 (6%)
Umbrella with limited authority	7 (8%)
Confederation	14 (16%)
Federation	33 (35%)
Single corporation	34 (35%)

Although recognizing that this topic needs substantial additional research we conclude, from a review of Tables 1, 2 and 3, that the respondents represented a diverse selection of ICSOs in size, structure and mission from which inferences could be drawn concerning the larger population.

Table 3. ICSO Primary Mission

Primary Mission (n=101)	No.	%age
Humanitarian Relief and Development	29	29%
Comprehensive Long Term Development	23	23%
Finance	13	13%
Specific Sector (e.g, WASH, Education, microfinance)	10	10%
Advocacy	8	8%
Humanitarian Relief	7	7%
Capacity Development/Training	6	6%
Human Rights/Law and Policy	5	5%

Interviews and advisory group

After reviewing Survey responses, we probed issues in greater detail through interviews. The three researchers conducted nine interviews of selected and experienced CSO members. The interviews were almost fully confirmatory of survey data, but allowed inquiry into greater detail by the researchers. To investigate further, the researchers invited five experienced past and present ICSO staff and a conflict resolution practitioner familiar with the sector to advise us through an informal advisory group. Through surveys and conference calls we worked to harvest the thoughts and ideas these experience ICSO members on the research topics. Where we note in this paper comments of the advisory group do not suggest that we found, nor

sought consensus. Rather we wanted to find informed input from advisory group members both as a group and individually.

Limitations

We recognize much more needs to be done on this issue, including additional research and the undertaking of pilot initiatives to reduce destructive conflict as well finding the upside of conflict. Our survey had only 100+ respondents and more than half were from the United States based organisations. The assistance of umbrella organisations was very useful for the distribution of the online survey. However, we had very little control over who would receive the survey. Our research was aware of, but did not probe, what may be significant differences between the views in headquarters versus national offices. We are also aware that, although important, it is very difficult to accurately assign a cost to the presence of intra-organisational conflict. Yet we recognize that morale problems, reductions in efficiency and employee turnover are present. We see this effort as a beginning not an end to the exploration of the nature an effect of intra organisational conflict on ICSOs and its role in their effectiveness.

THE LANDSCAPE

The landscape of ICSO intra-organisational conflict can be described in a number of ways. Here we do so in terms of (1) conflict expression; (2) origins or triggers; (3) capabilities to respond, including deployment of a conflict management system.

Conflict expression in ICSOs

Our study indicates conflict expressions in ISCOs are a commonplace feature with moderate to severe effects on the ICSOs and their ability to function. More than 60% of respondents report organisational Conflict is significant or even very common. Approximately 75% find the intensity of organisational Conflict to be at least moderate or even severe. When assessing the co-existence of conflict frequency and intensity, there appears to be a positive association with conflict frequency and intensity - suggesting that linkage is interesting for further inquiry.

Our study further indicates that respondents believe that conflict will continue to be a characteristic of ICSO life. In the years to come, organisational conflict is more likely to increase than decrease. Almost 70% of the respondents believe that in the next five years the instances of conflict will either increase or remain the same.

Table 4. Relationship between conflict frequency and intensity

		Within the last 5 years, how would you characterize the frequency of organisational conflict across the organisation?			
		Rare, almost never occurs	Occasional but not significant	Significant, happens more than necessary	Very common, frequent
Within the last 5 years, how would you characterize the intensity of the majority of organisational conflicts that arise?	Low intensity, customary for day to day work issues	6	15	3	1
	Moderate intensity, it affects performance, needs to be addressed	0	17	40	4
	Severe, major effects on function and performance, as well as morale	0	0	10	8

.This would seem consistent with the comments of various observers suggesting increased societal instability from a myriad of causes, such as globalization, environmental changes, political instability, economic inequity and so forth (ICSC, 2013).

Table 5: Perspectives on future conflict

Future perspectives on conflict	Number (%)
Significant increase in conflict frequency or intensity	7 (6.8%)
Modest increase in conflict frequency or intensity	25 (24.3%)
No change in frequency or intensity	37 (35.9%)
Improvement (reduction) of conflict frequency or intensity	32 (31.1%)

A key downside of conflict is observed as reduced organisational effectiveness. Respondents indicated that Conflict resulted in low morale, confusion about direction and loss of staff/resources/constituents.

A significant asymmetry was found in our research concerning whether conflict has a positive aspect. Approximately 75% of respondents believe that finding the upside of conflict was an important critical principle to improve organisational function. However, responses indicated that slightly less than half of the organisations tended to view conflict in ways that could gain an upside. Conflict that tended to result in positive changes were those involving organisational direction, goals and values. Where benefit was obtained from conflict, it occurred because the approach to conflict had tended to surface systemic problems, clarifying areas of confusion and finding better alignment around shared goals

Conflict origins and triggers

Common origins for moderate to severe conflict are issues about organisational direction, the distribution and application of authority, and about performance. Inter-cultural sensitivities / misunderstandings rate low as causes, but when in play are often reactions to a dominance of Western ideas or approaches to issues.

Table 6 Conflict origins

Conflict origin	Rank
Disputes over organisational direction, goals, or priorities	1
Disputes about distribution/application of authority (e.g. as among International Board and affiliates, head office and affiliates)	2
Performance disputes (disagreement about norms or standards; whether/how to evaluate performance)	3
Broad based organisational issues with diversity and inclusion (perceptions about lack of inclusion, hiring preferences, bias/prejudice, stereotyping)	4
Value based conflict (such as transparency, accountability, adherence to mission)	5
Inter-cultural sensitivities/misunderstandings	6
National level governance issues (membership, disputes within board, board and Executive Director disputes)	7
Non-compliance with agreed rules/policies (e.g. conflicts of interest)	8
Other conflicts	9

To some extent, the origins of conflict merged both task conflict and relational conflict. Because, as argued previously, ICSO personnel are more greatly motivated by organisational mission in comparison with market sector organizations, task and relationship conflict may overlap. Respondents identified the top 3 conflict origins as being goals, authority and performance (goals 16%, authority 15%, performance disputes 14%) each of which can be directly linked to the quality of organisational performance.

Conflict capabilities and responses in ISCOs

The data from the survey indicate that conflict capabilities in ISCOs are underdeveloped and should be improved in order for ICSOs to gain the benefits of conflict and prevent the destructive aspects of conflict. A significant percentage of respondents, 37.3% believed that conflicts are not effectively addressed and that the outcomes are rarely sustained. Only 15.7% of respondents felt that conflicts are both effectively addressed and outcomes are also sustained.

Table 7: Conflict capabilities

Treatment of conflicts	Percentage
Conflicts are not effectively addressed and the outcomes are rarely sustained	44.1
Conflicts are usually effectively addressed and the outcomes are not always sustained	37.3
Conflicts are effectively addressed with sustained outcomes	15.7

NB: 2% chose no opinion

Perceptions about capacity to deal with conflicts cost-effectively shows a similar pattern, with 17.3% of respondents believing that their ICSO has inadequate capability to deal with conflicts cost effectively. However, the majority (51 %) believe that there is moderate capability, which while not terrible there is certainly room for improvement.

While respondents indicate there are gaps in the effectiveness to respond to conflict, this is to be expected given the attitudes and approaches to conflict that emerged from respondents' comments and in interviews. *“There is reluctance to acknowledge the existence of conflict and underpinning factors still remain even when there [were] attempts to address conflict”* wrote one respondent. This perspective was echoed in the other comments in the survey and through interviews. Interviewees offered different explanations about the reasons for conflict denial and avoidance in the sector. These reasons included a “cognitive dissonance” – people don't want to believe that they can be experiencing competition, hostility and aggression instead of cooperation and collaboration that they had anticipated expecting that everyone has joined a “cause” for a similar reason. The majority of survey respondents felt that their organization's response to conflict could be characterized as inconsistent and incoherent. “Wishing for a ‘conflict-free’ work environment is unrealistic and pretending to have such an environment is undesirable” (Tjosvold 2008: 20).

Views about conflict in the ICSO sector appear to mirror the beliefs about organisational conflict prevalent in the mid-twentieth century and have not developed in line with more recent philosophies. Rahim (2001) describes three philosophies about organisational conflict that have developed over time: 1) the early view of conflict as negative (conflict should be eliminated); followed by 2) the fact that conflict is inevitable and occasionally beneficial and finally; (3) interactionist/pluralist view that:

“conflict [is]... a means of generating agreements and of creating agreed upon terms of collaboration. . . . Conflict becomes an instrument of social change and influence rather than a

symptom of a breakdown in social relationships. In fact, conflict behaviors must occur from time to time in order to demonstrate the will and capacity of action. (Rahim, 2001: 11)

In the ICSO community, 42% of respondents report that their organisations tend to want the conflict to be resolved and move on, indicating a view that conflict is something to be avoided and merely resolved. However, a healthy proportion (35%) report that their organisations find the value/upside of conflict on some occasions but only a small 8% reflect the interactionist/pluralist view of conflict and report regularly seeing conflict as an opportunity for change and innovation. There are also some positive results in the data that indicate scope to develop and promote healthy attitudes towards conflict in the sector.

Although further inquiry is needed, the large number of respondents indicating their organisation merely wants conflict be resolved may be tied to either lack of capacity to address conflict, or tendency to used top-down approaches, or both.

Table 8 Most common responses when asked to characterize their organisation’s response to conflict

The top four characterizations of conflict response	Rank	Number of respondents selecting this option
Inconsistent and are not coherent; conflicts get different responses and people are often confused about what to expect, what to do and where to get help	1	51
Tends be top down (senior) intervention	2	37
Not very well documented or understood	3	26
Based on interests, collaborative problem solving, prevention and building capacity	4	22

Unfortunately, very few respondents characterized their organisation’s response to conflict as being “well-documented and understood.” Approximately 80% of the respondents believe that a change to view conflict positively would result in either a modest or even significant improvement.

Use of conflict management systems

The importance of effective approaches to respond to conflict are highlighted by DeChurch et al, 2013.

In sum, the truth about team conflict seems to be that conflict processes, that is, how teams interact regarding their differences are at least as important as conflict states, that is the source and intensity of those perceived differences. (DeChurch et al, 2013: 67)

In other words, how difference and conflict are managed are as important as the source of conflict, whether it is task or relationship. Collaborative processes - greater focus on concern for and reliance on others, cooperation and collaboration - produce the most significant, positive outcomes and are associated with enhanced performance. Conversely, the failure to address intra-organisational conflict reduces internal collaboration and organizational performance. Conflict management is a precondition for collaboration within organizations (Hong and Ravendran, 2015: 2-3).

Our survey results indicate that collaborative processes are rare in ICSOs and that this is a significant gap in the ICSO community. Only 22% of respondents report that their ICSO response is based on interests, collaborative, problem-solving, prevention and capacity building. There is some good news in however, as only 15% characterize their ICSO response as based on rights, policies and imposing solutions. The outcome of intergroup conflict is dependent on how the groups respond to conflict, where dysfunctional outcomes that impact effectiveness are more likely if the win-lose approaches common to rights based approaches are employed. (Rahim, 2001: 168).

Conflict management systems are an established means of ensuring effective, collaborative conflict management in an organization (Conberre, 2001 Constantino and Merchant, 1996). Yet, the use of conflict management systems in ICSOs seems to be virtually absent. The vast majority of respondents indicated that their organization did not have any conflict management system (42%) and only 18% have a conflict management system while indicating that it was not used with regularity. A significant majority of respondents indicated that their organisation either did not have a conflict management system that was comprehensive - with only 5% indicating a system was in place - and regularly and effectively used.

When looking at whether individual components of a conflict management system were in place a clear pattern emerges – the emphasis in the ICSOs is primarily on rights-based approaches (a rights-based process is determined by “rights” defined by law or contract, not on collaborative processes (also called interest-based processes which “focuses on identifying and meeting the needs of each party to the greatest extent possible” (Conberre, 2001: 217)

This data was confirmed by additional original research and interviews. Researchers and practitioners suggest that the converse is the most effective and healthy organisational proportion – interest-based approaches should be more much more commonly used than rights-based (Conberre 2001; Constantino and Merchant, 2013; Ury, Brett and Goldberg, 1988). The healthy components of conflict management system do not appear to be regularly employed in the sector, with the exception of training and capacity building.

Table 9 Most Common Use of Conflict Management System Components

Most commonly used components (sometimes/regularly used)(top 4)	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
Grievance procedures	83%	74
Training and capacity building	75%	57
Conflict management policies	51%	39
Coaching programme	47%	35

There is one positive indication in the least commonly used approaches which include organisational sanctions. Negative inducements such as sanctions are rarely/never used more than they are regularly used, although a notable 17% report using them regularly, despite evidence that they are ineffective and problematic for performance.

Table10 Least Common Use of Conflict Management System Components

Least commonly used components (rarely/never)(top 4)	Percentage of responses	Number of respondents
Ombuds	87%	57
Organisational sanctions	75%	52
Mediation with mediators	73%	49
Conflict advisors	64%	41

Where Conflict management systems were absent, 60% of the respondents believed such a system should be put in place.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of our research are a mixture: some matters concerning ICSO conflict are rather clear, while others are less so, pointing to issues needing further inquiry. In both those that are clear and those that are not, there is a justification for ICSOs to give a priority to addressing the issue of intra-organisational conflict. There are also ways in which ICSOs can

draw on wider experiences to establish a healthy conflict perspective (HCP) that increases the potential for transforming conflict into organisationally positive outcomes.

Together with some unexpected findings, on the whole our quantitative data supports the hypotheses developed at the start of this study. Without relevant studies, we had little basis on which to compare or benchmark our findings. Hopefully this work has contributed much-needed information on a topic virtually devoid of systematic enquiry yet of consequence for ICSO effectiveness.

Our research confirmed that **organisational conflict is a commonplace feature of ICSOs with moderate to severe effects**. All sources of information used in this research, including the online survey, recommendations from our advisory group as well as interviews with senior ICSO personnel confirm this feature of organisational life. Although not applicable to every ICSO, relevant data confirms conflict is ‘normal’. A surprise was that, although individuals shared their views freely about conflict and ICSOs, at the organisational level and above there was reluctance to approach the subject. Being publicly associated with conflict as a factor of organisational life appears to be a ‘no no’

As anticipated, the **conditions and conflict management systems necessary to ensure that benefits of conflict are gained and the destructive costs minimized are rare**. Not anticipated at the start of the study, were an unraveling of the specific conditions that would be required for conflict to be productive and the reasons why these conditions were absent. First, leadership and active management are key to ensuring conflict is productive; however, for ICSOs pro-active conflict management is atypical. Overall, organisational attitudes to conflict in the sector tend to be counterproductive, and among ICSOs, conflict avoidance and denial are common.

This study indicates that conflict denial is much more common than effective conflict intervention. Conflict is significant or even common (60+%) and at least moderate to severe (75+%), yet ICSO’s do not seem terribly motivated to act or engage the subject. Anecdotal data from respondents and interviews demonstrated some high levels of frustration resulting from the perception that senior management tended to “sweep conflict under the rug.” Additionally, three quarters of ICSO employees believe finding a positive outcome from organisational conflict is important or even critical, but 45% of the organisations are described as “just want the conflict to be resolved and move on.” Advisory group members suggest that this indicates that, ICSO’s have a huge skills gap. Despite a large body of cited

for-profit research and evidence demonstrating that conflict can have a positive impact on performance (among others, Tjosvold 2008), this belief does not appear to be commonly held throughout the ICSO sector. Quite simply, avoiding proactive management of conflict impairs effectiveness with a picture of tolerance for this situation which points to issues of accountable leadership.

A second necessary condition to enable conflict to be productive and drive performance is the use of collaborative and interest-based processes, which again appear largely absent from ICSOs. On initiating the study, our questions were related to *what* conflict management systems ICSOs had in place not, *if* they had anything in place at all. Our assumption that ICSOs would have some integrated mechanisms, including interest-based and collaborative approaches, in place to respond to conflict does not appear to be borne out. Few organisations have properly functional conflict management systems. As such, the destructive elements of conflict remain present and the benefits that could arise from conflict are infrequently realised. Members of the advisory group were somewhat surprised at how infrequently ICSOs had and used CMS. We further conclude that, although other sectors are quite distinct from ICSO's, knowledge on the use of CMS from other sectors can be useful in civil society. One observer commented on the natural fit of conflict management systems approaches (participatory, collaborative) and the stated organisational values of ICSOs that should provide enabling pre-conditions for ICSOs to make conflict work in their favour.⁵

Finally, our initial hypothesis that there are unclaimed opportunities for ICSOs to benefit from conflict, including preparing for disruption, are somewhat supported by our findings but further action-oriented research will be needed to explore this more deeply. **There are opportunities to gain a wide range of upsides from properly-managed conflict.** Three out of four Respondents believed that finding the value and conflict is either important or very important to the future and function of ICSO; yet less than 1 in 10 stated that this was regularly done in their organization. Interestingly, Respondents in organisations that see conflict as having an upside never reported that their organisational conflicts were not effectively addressed. Some in our advisory group suggested that ICSOs are reluctant to search for the upside because of the fear that opening up the issue of conflict could result in reputational damage. Table 6 offers a guide to areas where, if constructively addressed,

⁵ We would like to thank Mark McPeak formerly of ChildFund International Australia for this observation.

conflicts have potential to produce positive change. These are: (a) resolving disputes over organisational direction, goals or priorities; (b) working through value based conflicts, such as those about transparency accountability and adherence to mission; and, (c) sorting out root causes of noncompliance with agreed-upon rules or standards. This result tallies with the research indicating that “task conflict” can have a positive impact on performance.

Respondents noted the following three as the top potential benefits from working through conflict in a positive way: (a) clarifying areas of confusion; (b) bringing to the surface systemic flaws that need correction; and, (c) better alignment around shared goals. More than half of the respondents believed that organisations that viewed conflict as a source of change could improve significantly or even dramatically by doing so.

Working effectively with conflict contributes to an organisation’s resilience. Making the most of diverse perspectives and points of view, helps the organisation to change, be flexible, be open and avoid the perils of “group-think”. This upside of conflict can be important for ICSOs to prepare them in dealing with future and un-anticipated challenges, such as external disruption (ICSC, 2013). Advisory group members suggested that ICSOs who better address conflict will also enhance future relevance, role, sustainability and effectiveness, although this would need to be researched further.

Although the potential for positive change from conflict is widely seen so also is denial and avoidance. For ICSOs to find the benefit that can arise from conflict, conflict will have to be approached more directly and effectively.

Towards Remedies: Adopting a Healthy Conflict Perspective

Our research has helped to construct a comprehensive and unique picture of the conflict landscape in the ICSO community. Conflict is common and not a crisis. But the conditions are not in place for most organisations in the sector to ensure difference and disagreement enhance performance. Converting even a fraction of the energy used for conflict avoidance into a healthy approach to conflict “would pay off handsomely” (Tversold 2008: 25). On the basis of extant literature, our experience and the ICSO research described herein, we proposed four key areas that ICSOs should develop and integrate to maximize the productive aspects of conflict and minimize the destructive costs. The remedy: establish what can be called a

Healthy Conflict Perspective (HCP) which integrates these four components: Leadership, Culture, Processes and Conversations.⁶ For improvement, ICSOs need to work on all four.

A healthy conflict perspective is an intentional and sustained orientation that treats ‘disharmony’ as a normal, desirable and creative feature of organisational life. Wider research has demonstrated both the short and long term benefits of positively and cooperatively-oriented approaches to organisational conflict (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2001: 208). We suggest an organisational wide perspective that avoids the error of viewing ‘conflict management’ as a niche, undertaken by the human resources department. Because intra-organisational conflict pervades the organization, an approach to conflict must address all functional areas; “working with others and managing conflict are inseparable...” within teams, across departments and between offices (Tjosvold 2008: 20).

Organisations that have an HCP provide institutional support for individuals and groups to work with conflict. Our expectation is that an HCP, effectively undertaken, would promote team performance, improve programs, enhance citizenship, promote learning while at the same time providing organizational development and self reflection. (Tjosvold 2008: 20). Such benefits go beyond mere task and relationship issues to the broader issue of deepening and strengthening relationships (ibid: 2).

The prospect of HCP in theory needs to be tried out in practice through action research. We propose that a commitment to a change in perspective can lead to real benefit – beyond just addressing the conflict but actually increasing morale, organisational resilience and program effectiveness. This study confirms our working hypothesis, suggesting that ICSOs take counter-initiatives tailored to their unique conditions and needs.

CONCLUSIONS

Our research has started to ‘lift a veil’ so to speak, on a type of organisational behavior that co-determines the effectiveness of international civil society organisations dedicated to humanitarian relief and development. That in increasingly turbulent settings, this task will generate passion-driven internal troubles seems to be born out. Also confirmed is a general lack of ICSO conflict competencies, while the merits of having them seem readily apparent to staff. This disconnect, or anomaly, may be explained by an underlying ICSO ‘philosophy’.

⁶ An expanded treatment of HCP will be forthcoming on www.inter-mediation.org

In terms of theory from the for profit sector, ICSOs – many of which are becoming more ‘business-like’ as an adaptive strategy (Ronalds, 2010; ICSC, 2014) – seem to be at a pre-philosophy to Rahim’s (2001) stage 1 of conflict elimination. The ICSO stance appears to be one of avoidance and pragmatic muddling through. A paradox between reported negative effects of frequent conflict met with denial/avoidance and the lack of effective conflict management is highly suggestive of a considered response. ICSO leadership is now asked to “stop ignoring emerging disruptions and start preparing for the related opportunities and threats” (ICSC 2013: 2). Leadership is not blind or ill-informed but assesses the costs and benefits in a particular way, informed a by a culture which seeks to bring about external change though non-conflicted processes. This stance is possibly a cost-effective strategy when set against systemic investment in transformation of conflict energy into organisational gains - but who knows? The answer is, probably no one with any degree of confidence, which points to areas where more focussed research would be beneficial. Here, we are thinking of: (a) the link between external turbulence, internal conflict and organisational design;(b) the contribution of constructive conflict behavior to organisational resilience; (c) the actual cost of dysfunctional conflict on ICSOs - lost opportunities, level of employee turnover, deteriorating internal morale and tolerance with a failure to reap the gains of functional/healthy conflict, etc; and (d) testing the extent to which literature on organisational conflict from other sectors can be applicable to ICSO, for example the salience of task versus, personal categories of conflict.

Intra-organisational conflict is inevitable. What need not be inevitable is whether or not conflict produces gains in or works against effectiveness. The probability of either outcome lies in the hands of ICSO leadership.

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