



BRIEFING NOTE

Gaining the upside of conflict –survey and study

December 2014

1. BACKGROUND

Arising from informal conversations in December, 2013, representatives of six International Civil Society Organisations (ICSO) (World Vision International, ActionAid International, Plan, Amnesty International and SOS Children's Villages and CBM) met and had an exploratory conversation to see if there was a common interest in ensuring that disputes within their respective 'family' are made productive. They concluded that there was merit in an initiative designed to generate 'tailored' resources which would enhance the capabilities needed to constructively address intra-organisational conflicts as and when they arise. Amnesty International invited IMI - a not for profit organisation dedicated to improving development relationships - to facilitate the meeting and produce a forward looking report.

The December conversation made clear that the (opportunity) costs of intra-organisational conflicts are typically under-observed, under-estimated and under-addressed. More importantly, the state of flux in which ICSOs find themselves – for example, in planned or ongoing (de)centralisation, or in governance reforms – heighten the probability of internal disagreements emerging, sharpening, distracting and destabilizing. This condition adds urgency to developing the capabilities required to ensure that the treatment of conflict adds value to the organisation, by becoming strategically incorporated in processes of change. A further observation was that increasing calls for ICSO collaboration with others strengthens the need to have ones 'conflict competencies' house in order.

2. RATIONAL

There is very little research on conflict in the ICSO community compared, for example, with the wealth of research in health and private sectors. Yet conflict is an integral/essential feature of our work as change agents. Conflict, although inevitable, complex, messy and difficult, is a potentially important source of organisational improvement. When well managed and constructive, conflict is a force to stimulate learning, innovation, and productive change. Conflict also provides opportunities for improving and strengthening relationships, working practices and an organisation's resilience.

A recent study by the International Civil Society Centre (ICSC) argued that significant forces of disruptive change are on the doorstep, if not already in the ICSO household.¹ Given their diversity, some ICSOs will be more susceptible to diverse disruptive forces than others, but none will be immune from the world that is changing around them. Civil Society Organisations must be able to positively respond to change, adapt and be diverse and inclusive in order to move beyond survival and to thrive. To do all of this, we need to understand conflict, to work with and value difference and welcome productive disagreement. However our initial investigations indicate conflict within ICSOs is mainly viewed and experienced as a destructive force. Consequently, little time or other resources are provided to develop systems and competencies that support a culture of conflict competence, yet much time and resources are used in reactions to destructive conflict.

¹ ICSC, 2013, Riding the Waves - rather than being swept away: A proposal for Boards and CEOs on how to prepare their organisation for disruptive change, International Civil Society Centre, Berlin.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study proposed would advance one critical aspect of the 'preparing for disruption' call stemming from the ICSC report. The overall objective of this study is to:

Increase ICSOs' capability for management of internal conflicts with a view to making them productive sources of organizational change.

The study is focused on learning about conflict within ICSOs themselves, by compiling and analysing data from different ICSOs allowing for a benchmarking / broad comparisons / learning from what works. The focus will initially concentrate on conflict within an ICSO family/system rather than within the individual parts of the family, e.g., within the Head Office or within one individual member/affiliate. The study will look into causes and triggers of conflict, the institutional attitudes and responses, and the impact of conflict on the family. As such, in a first stage, we want to look broadly at all forms of INGO association: federations, associations, affiliations, managerial umbrellas, and so forth.

4. RESEARCH TEAM

This study is undertaken in a voluntary collaboration between IMI and Amnesty International – both parties see this study as an essential and fundamental piece of knowledge generation with practical application.

Amnesty International recognises the value of sharing and learning on organisational conflict, which for the past two years has been a priority for the team sponsoring this initiative. The time of a staff member - Elizabeth Field - specialising in organisational conflict, based in the Crisis and Conflict Management Unit (CMU) at the International Secretariat, is being made available to do so. The persons of Alan Fowler and Joe McMahon of IMI bring many years of practical and research engagement in the world of ICSOs, allied to experience in constructive resolution of conflicts that a variety of organisations deal with.

5. APPROACH/METHODOLGY

The overall approach is to collect, analyse and make available information and knowledge on the extent of intra-organisational conflict in ICSOs, how ICSOs are practically dealing with internal conflict and their experiences in doing so. The research team anticipate that the study will have at least two phases, outlined below.

Phase I –e-Survey to collect and analyse quantitative data

Survey data will be collected anonymously - there will be no attribution of responses.

Phase I will consist of a broad survey which will look at two sets of issues:

1. The current context of intra-organisational conflict in ICSOs
 - The frequency and intensity of conflict
 - The effect of conflict on organisational function/performance
 - An assessment of how well ICSOs address conflict between their various components, e.g., IH and affiliates, including those that cannot be resolved internally,
 - Most common conflict origins
 - How ICSOs presently view conflict and whether it is seen as a stimulus for improvement
 - Whether and to what extent ICSOs have/use conflict management systems

2. Going forward and improving how conflict is addressed
 - What is the expected frequency and intensity of conflict in the next 5 years
 - Opinions on whether ICSOs can benefit by a change in perspective on conflict (from avoidance to stimulating valuable change) and the potential benefit therefrom

- How changes in perspective can be made within ICSOs
- Useful sources of information or examples of ICSOs using conflict productively
- The research team are looking to get as broad and coherent a perspective as possible meaning that they will be seeking responses from anyone at the organisation who has experience of managing conflict within the INGO family.

The study will be seeking responses from individuals within the organisation who work on organisational conflict within the INGO family and this may be from any or all of the following roles:

Organisational development
 Governance and accountability
 Dedicated conflict management team, ombuds, conflict advisors, facilitators/ mediators, etc
 Partnership management
 Legal
 Risk management

This broad Phase I concentrates on collecting and enumerating quantitative data to establish a general profile of the situation and potentials for improvement in conflict capabilities. This analysis will be complemented by outreach to individuals and organisations who can provide context and deepen understanding.

Phase II – Deeper qualitative enquiry

Phase II will depend heavily on what is indicated by the findings in phase I. However it is anticipated that Phase II will concentrate on exploring important issues in greater detail and gathering more directed qualitative data. Some of the issues that may be explored in phase II include:

Accountability
 Cross cultural differences in conflict
 Organisational culture and its impact on conflict
 Leadership approaches and their impact on conflict
 The ‘transferability’ of existing tools and methods

We expect Phase II to include both focused surveys and interviews.

5. EXPECTED OUTPUTS

Phase I: The research team will analyse the results of Phase I and will share the analysis with organisations providing access to their members. This analysis will be oriented towards both to better defining the current context and considering practical implications in relation to enhancing capabilities that would make conflict productive. In addition, each respondent will be receive the summary results at the time of completing the survey.

Depending on the quality of the data collected, feedback may be in the form of a report or a summary of product / recommendations for the ICSO community. Examples are practical guidelines in relation to managing conflict or a list of capacity development areas.

Phase II: Using the results of Phase 1 and the Phase 2 interviews, together with information about the approaches taken in the market sector, we expect a Phase 2 report to describe: (a) whether/to what extent ICSOs effectively use conflict management systems (CMSs); (b) possible lessons from market sector use of CMS; (c) CMS best practices for ICSOs; and, (d) approaches to ICSO conflict that have uncovered the value/upside of conflict.