



Cause &
Conflict

Concept Note

By Luke Holland & Deepa Natarajan



Conflict in civil society

One of the greatest strategic advantages of the forces of retrogression is their ability to collaborate seamlessly across ideological divides. In contrast, one of the most significant strategic weaknesses of the forces of progressivity is their tendency towards infighting and factionalism. It is often argued that NGOs and social movements are inherently conflictive, given that their very purpose is to disrupt and ameliorate both the underpinnings and manifestations of systemic injustices.

While extensive research exists on workplace conflict in the corporate sector, relatively limited attention has been paid to its dynamics in civil society. These facts notwithstanding, existing research on conflict within and among civil society organisations (CSOs) suggests that discord and tension within the sector are extremely pervasive and that it very significantly undermines impact whilst also exacting a heavy toll on the wellbeing of workers.

The sociologist Amitai Etzioni notes that civil society professionals often derive a deep sense of identity from their work, making them more disposed to interpersonal and organisational conflict than their counterparts in the private sector.

Interviews and surveys conducted by the authors with professionals from across the Global North and Global South suggest that the lack of skills to engage in difficult conversations, combined with a firm commitment to horizontal decision-making and the pressure of limited resources, may also fuel conflicts within and among CSOs. Importantly, independent research on the issue shows that by comparison with the private sector, civil society is woefully unprepared to manage internal conflict. This is likely to be a significant contributory factor to soaring rates of burnout, which are much higher than those experienced in the private sector.

There is an inherent assumption in this sector that ‘conflict should not happen in civil society because we are all on the same side’. In reality, however, conflict is inevitable in human collaborations, and if effectively managed, can serve to refine strategy, fortify commitment, and strengthen impact.

While civil society has undoubtedly achieved huge victories – most social progress arguably owes itself to the efforts of committed activists – it is also well-documented that factionalism and infighting dramatically undermine the impact of CSOs and in some cases leads to organisational failure. All professionals consulted in the course of developing this initiative recalled damaging conflicts both within their organisation and with other organisations in their ecosystem. They cited recurring, long-term, unresolved conflict as a ubiquitous feature of their working life.

At a time when regressive forces seem ascendant and the space for civil society is shrinking, the need for a resilient and agile civil society that can navigate internal tensions and turn conflict into strength has never been more critical.



The costs of unresolved conflicts

When good intentions collide

In a survey conducted to develop this concept note, which was completed by over 40 civil society leaders and professionals from across the Global North and Global South, approximately 80% of respondents reported that conflict significantly impacted their levels of stress and reduced their ability to work effectively.

The survey results also revealed a high level of apathy regarding conflict, with approximately 70% of respondents believing that conflicts become chronic because parties do not believe people or systems will change meaningfully.

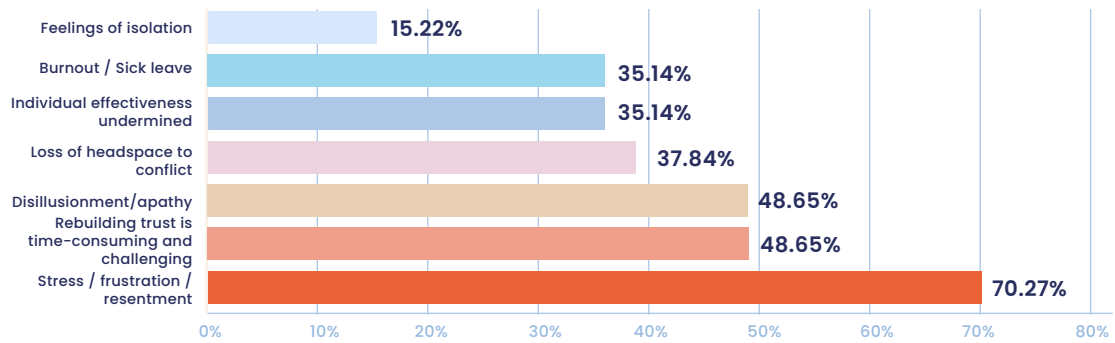
Conflicts in civil society organisations, especially between senior leaders, often persist for a year or more, with some lasting over a decade. This quietly erodes trust and affects teams as a whole due to a lack of safe resolution channels.



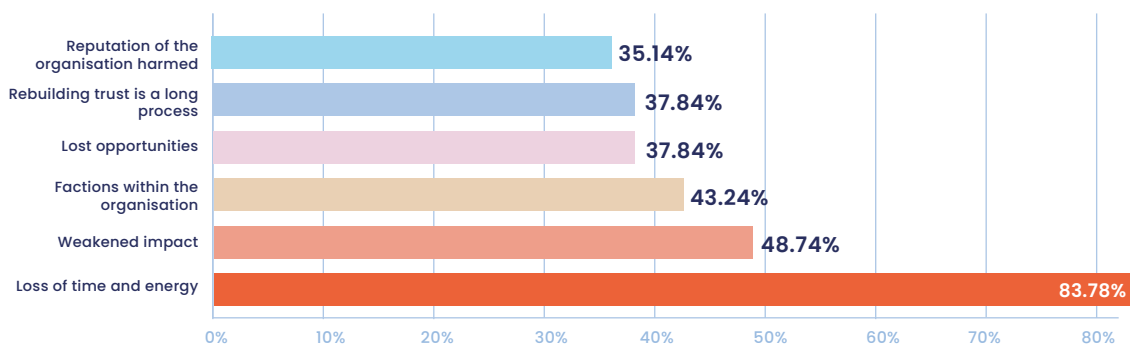


The results below, from civil society actors around the world, reveal a pattern of negative impacts on individuals, organisations, and broader social movements resulting from poorly managed conflict situations.

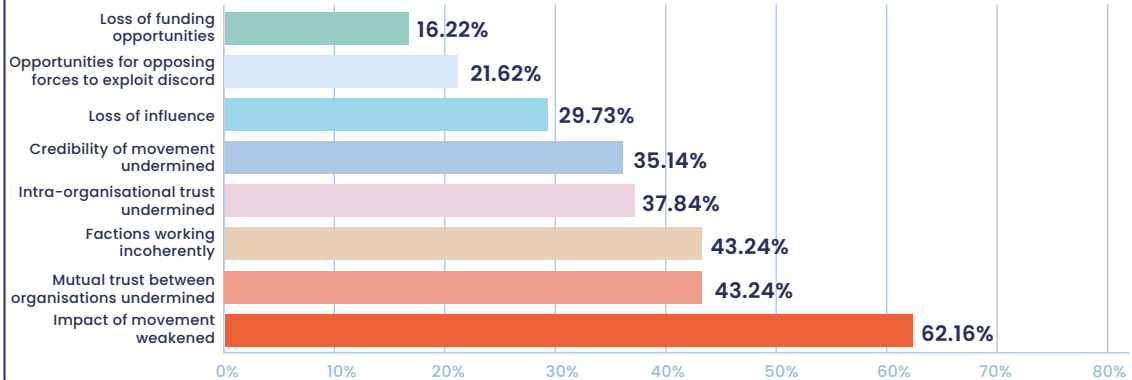
Impact on individuals



Impact on organisation



Impact on movement





The shape of discord

How conflicts unfold

There are two aspects to interpersonal workspace relationships:

Dynamics

Dynamics refers to the impact of interpersonal interactions at an emotional and psychological level.

Mechanics

Mechanics refers to impact of interactions in terms of management, structures, processes, and governance.

In conflict, teams tend to default to shifting the blame to systems and leadership due to a lack of skills in handling relational complexity, leading to misplaced blame focusing on the mechanics of interactions. While conflict can unfold in many ways, our experience of resolving deep-rooted tensions in the private sector over the past 15 years has revealed three critical stages.

Phase 1

Pre-conflict

In the early stages of conflict, nascent sources of tension and reticence tend to go unaddressed, and there is a high level of 'false harmony' among the parties involved.

Dynamics

- Slow collaborative pace
- False harmony
- Lack of closeness and connection

Mechanics

- Unspoken reticence
- Lack of clarity
- Power imbalances

Phase 2

Active conflict

As conflict becomes manifest, frustration and resentment tend to lead to retrenchment in personal and strategic positions, with judgment and blame concretising.

Dynamics

- Unspoken inflexibility
- Loss of agency
- Feeling powerless

Mechanics

- Weak intervention
- Capacity undermined
- Covert resistance

Phase 3

Chronic/late-stage conflict

As issues are not effectively addressed, conflict either becomes chronic or suboptimal 'solutions' emerge, relationships and well-being are significantly damaged, and strategic objectives are undermined.

Dynamics

- Resentment
- Disillusionment
- Burnout/sick leave

Mechanics

- Reputational damage
- Mission jeopardised
- Transition costs



Phase 1

Pre-conflict

Dynamics

Slow collaborative pace: There is an inherent assumption that dedication to the cause means people share the same perspectives on the 'how', leaving space for ambiguity on convergence. Frustration over the 'pace' of collaboration slowly emerges.

False harmony: False harmony pervades as people get to know each other. Hence, there is a tendency not to debate, argue, or fight during the forming stage. People often feel inadequate as they are not officially empowered to bring different parties together to resolve differences and aim for a higher degree of collaboration.

Lack of closeness and connection: Unvoiced suspicions stemming from legacy issues are not addressed, as people assume that new structural changes, alliances, and processes will limit their impact. A high degree of sensitivity keeps people from bringing up complex issues in the forming stage. Parties often accept clauses in agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) despite unspoken reticence.

Mechanics

Unspoken reticence: Parties, feeling enthused by mission or collaboration, often take on commitments despite unspoken concern over capacity limits.

Lack of clarity: A lack of clarity and mutual understanding between parties is ubiquitous at this stage: MoUs between organisations often lack clarity on roles, accountability, and conflict resolution; Communication failures within an organisation often ramify into interorganisational relations.

Power imbalances: Power imbalances of financial/infrastructure support of bigger players lead to tensions



Phase 2

Active conflict

Dynamics

Unspoken inflexibility: Individuals' commitment to intellectual or ideological purity often underpins inflexibility when there is a disagreement. Hence, a lot of reactive and proactive blame is witnessed in this phase as passion and expertise collude into identity.

Loss of agency: There is tension as people play a game of cohesion when, deep down, they disagree on ways of implementation. These feelings are downplayed in order not to escalate the situation and cause stress and anxiety.

Feeling powerless: Stress grows as people don't feel valued. As they are unable to resolve differences within the organisation, and externally, conflicts are left unresolved, and relationships begin to disintegrate.

Mechanics

Weak intervention: A principled commitment to horizontality often leads to non-intervention as parties are reticent to tackle a conflict head-on. Where conflict management processes exist, they are frequently not utilised, or where they are used, they prove ineffective.

Capacity undermined: As conflict absorbs all energy, individuals and their organisations experience a loss of time and capacity.

Covert resistance : Parties go about implementing their agenda without collaboration with others. Parties often build alliances of allies, sometimes culminating in 'ambushing'. A lack of role clarity exacerbates conflict as parties become entrenched in diverging perceptions of their respective roles.



Phase 3

Chronic/late-stage conflict

Dynamics

Resentment: Human and interpersonal dynamics have been chronically undermined, with parties often feeling disillusionment, a sense of being disrespected, and with it, resentment

Disillusionment: Parties experience sadness as they feel no option but to leave the organisation or mission behind.

Burnout/sick leave: At this stage, burnout and long-term sick leave often emerge, in turn fuelling capacity challenges

Mechanics

Reputational damage: Conflict often leads to reputational harm and loss of legitimacy for organisations involved. In some cases, acts of retaliation can cause further harm and threaten to perpetuate a conflict cycle.

Mission jeopardised: Reduced organisational performance and reputational harm can lead to loss of funding

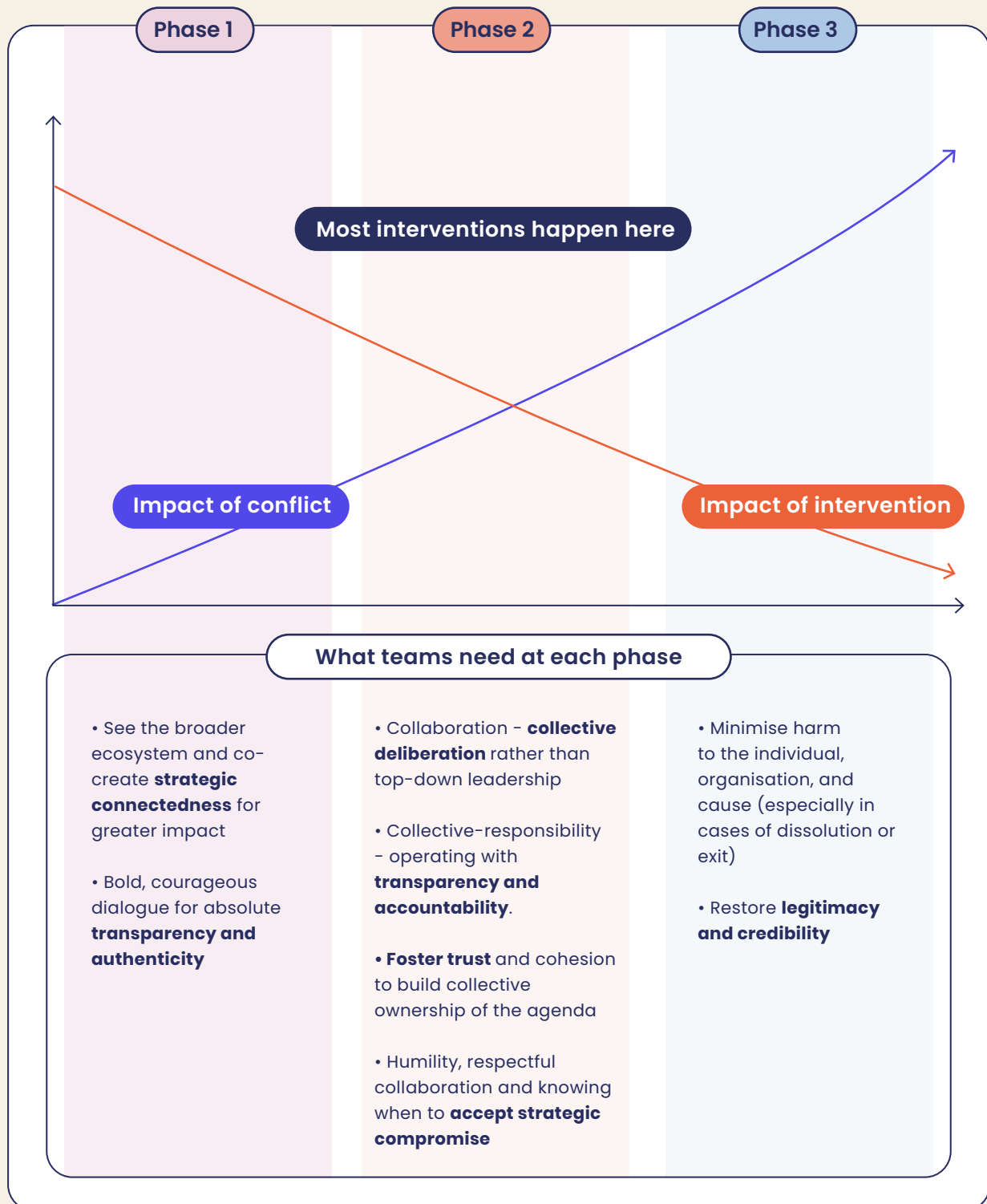
Transition costs : including the recruitment of new staff and severance for departing staff, are incurred, often damaging the organisation's sustainability.



Finding the opportunity in conflict

Understanding impact, needs and transforming outcomes

As illustrated in the graphic below, **most conflict interventions happen in Stage 2**, despite the fact that proactive interventions in Stage 1 are most effective.



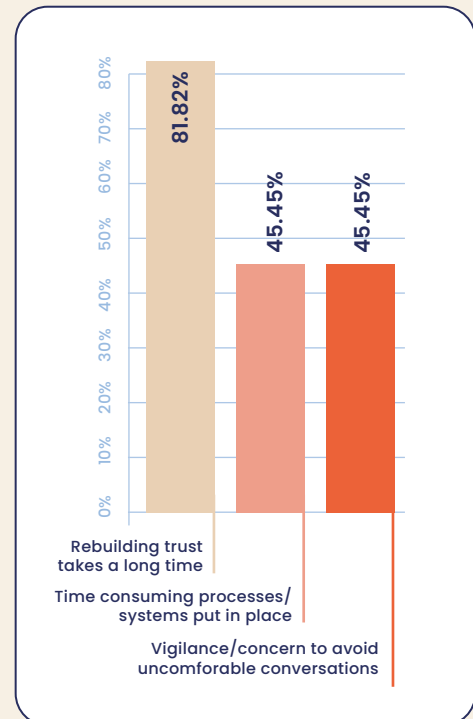


Transforming unresolved conflict

The provision of expert conflict management skills, resources, and support to civil society organisations holds the potential to dramatically improve staff wellbeing whilst also strengthening organisational impact.

When asked what factors might have facilitated better resolution of past conflicts they were engaged in, the majority of participants in our research pointed to better leadership and strong governance. On the question of what might facilitate rapprochement in conflict situations, a pronounced majority - 58% - cited the need for support from professional conflict resolution experts with an understanding of the organisation's work.

There was near-universal recognition of the benefits that support and skill-building in navigating conflict situations would have for individuals, organisations and movements as a whole. Interviewees and survey respondents from across the Global North and Global South who were consulted as part of this research affirmed that such support would provide:



To the individual

Better conflict resolution to reduce stress, improve well-being, foster confidence, and create a more supportive work environment.



To the organisation

Benefits include enhanced collaboration, increased efficiency, improved staff morale, stronger alignment with values, and enhanced leadership and governance.



To the movement

Participants foresee greater impact, stronger cohesion, improved reputation, and sustainable collaboration aligned with shared values and goals.

Our approach to conflict management intervention draws on a range of proven methodologies and resources, including:

The Coactive Leadership Model

Resources of the Leadership Circle

The Rethink Leadership Methodology

Adult Development and Learning Theory

Experiential group and individual coaching



What we do

There is a clear need for better conflict management in NGOs and social movements. Cause and Conflict has been established with the mission to bring effective conflict management skills, insight, and support tailored to the sector's unique challenges. By adapting proven tools to this context, we aim to improve staff well-being and increase organisational impact.

Detox workshops

When teams avoid tough conversations, trust erodes and performance declines. The Team Detox is a game-changing two-day intervention designed to reset interpersonal dynamics by surfacing unspoken issues and restoring relational strength. Through a non-traditional, human-centred approach, we create breakthroughs that place both humanity and collective efficacy at the heart of the organisation.

Diagnostics & MEL

Our diagnostic process makes the invisible visible, surfacing the human dynamics that affect morale, collaboration, and impact. Using interviews, collective leadership assessment tools (CLA), and workshops, we assess team culture, governance, communication, and conflict patterns to create a clear strategy for overall performance. These insights, alone at times, restore psychological safety, clarify principles, and foster a culture where solidarity and impact thrive. While Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) practices have evolved, they often overlook how conflict shapes project outcomes. We offer tailored MEL analysis that examines the interpersonal, cultural, and strategic dimensions of conflict, helping civil society actors understand and address the root causes that hinder effectiveness and alignment. We provide bespoke MEL analysis of civil society projects, programs and collaborations that unpack the often-hidden factors which underpin and exacerbate mission-hindering conflict dynamics.

Conflict-conscious strategy development

Helps organisations and individuals prevent harm to both well-being and strategic outcomes. While early, pre-conflict intervention is most effective, most support only arrives once damage is underway. To address this gap, Cause and Conflict offers 'conflict-conscious' strategy facilitation that builds the skills and insight needed to anticipate, navigate, and transform conflict into a source of clarity, alignment, and impact.





About Deepa Natarajan

Deepa Natarajan is a senior leadership coach who helps individuals and teams resolve inner and outer conflicts, supporting them in leading with courage, clarity, and conviction. She designs organisational leadership and change workshops that support teams to make change happen, through her Rethink Leadership Methodology (RLM)

With over 26 years of global experience, Deepa combines a unique cross-cultural perspective with Eastern philosophy and Western leadership tools to create space for meaningful conversations, strengthening relationships and accelerating work impact. She has inspired more than 2,250 leaders across 30+ organisations to lead with soul and create lasting impact. She has worked with organisations such as Airbus, Sanofi, InfraRx, Tesa, SAP, SNCF, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.



About Luke Holland

Luke Holland is an experienced human rights activist and communications professional. Over the course of more than two decades in the human rights movement, he has led major convenings of human rights, sustainable development, climate, and gender justice organisations from across the Global North and the Global South. He began his career as a journalist, working with titles including The Irish Times, Channel 4 News (UK), ITV News at 10 (UK), Al Jazeera, and El País (Spain), before transitioning into the field of human rights research and advocacy.

As communications officer and researcher with the Centre for Economic and Social Rights, he worked on issues of human rights and economic policy in Colombia, Peru, the United States, Ireland and Spain. In recent years, he has served as Network and Partner Relations Manager with the influential activist think tank Tax Justice Network, where he has worked extensively in coordinating international human rights and economic justice collaborations.

