



Cause &
Conflict

Conflict in civil society

By Luke Holland & Deepa Natarajan



Conflict in civil society

Pervasive, devastating and largely unaddressed

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.

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**, fuels conflicts within and among civil society organisations (CSOs).

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.

Existing research on conflict within and among CSOs suggests that discord and tension within the sector are extremely pervasive and very significantly undermines effectiveness whilst also exacting a heavy toll on the wellbeing of workers. A wide-ranging survey conducted as part of this research found that **over 70% experienced serious stress due to internal conflict. Almost 40% experienced burnout or required sick leave**, with similar numbers reporting reduced effectiveness and loss of headspace. These figures suggest the psychoemotional ramifications lead to reduced effectiveness and serious financial costs.

When good intentions collide

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 CSO's capability and in some cases leads to organisational failure. **Nearly 50% of respondents stated that internal conflict significantly weakened their organisational impact.** They cited recurring, long-term, unresolved conflict as a ubiquitous feature of their working life, significantly undermining impact, wellbeing and financial sustainability. Conflicts, especially between senior leaders, often persist for a year or more, with some lasting over a decade. A staggering **62% of respondents believed that a lack of skills and resources to resolve conflicts between organisations weakened their movements as a whole.**

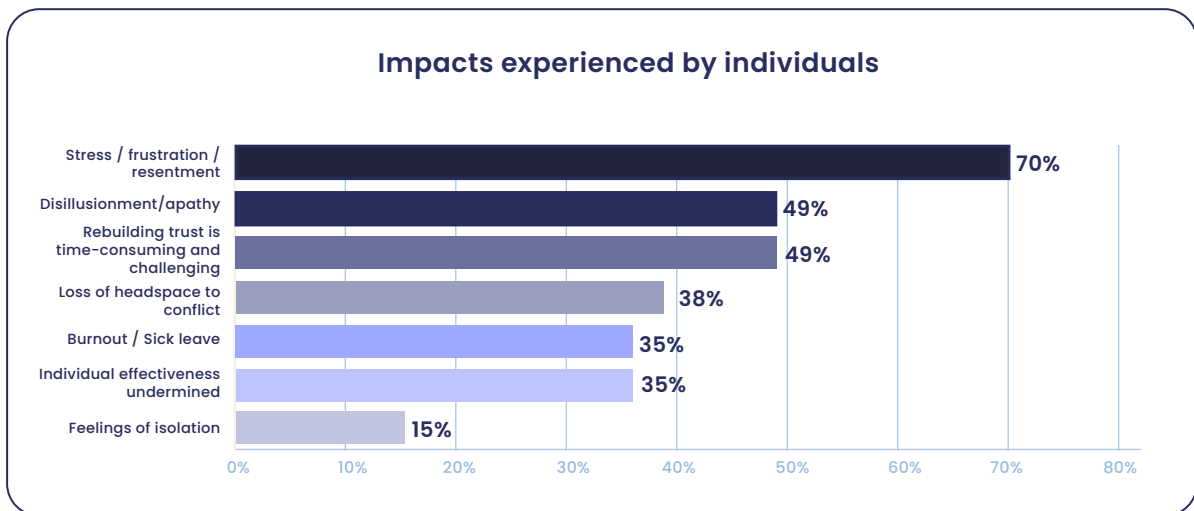
Importantly, independent research on the issue shows that **by comparison with the private sector, civil society is woefully unprepared** to manage internal conflict. At a time when regressive forces seem ascendant and the space for civil society is shrinking, the need for a cohesive civil society that can navigate internal tensions and turn conflict into strength has never been more critical.

How might the outcomes we see in the world be different if collaboration among progressive actors was strengthened and infighting reduced? The current reality of pervasive conflict is not inevitable. Effective tools and resources exist to mitigate, resolve and even leverage conflict for greater unity. Cause and Conflict exists to bring these resources to progressive actors.



The costs of unresolved conflicts

...for individuals



A survey completed by over 40 civil society leaders and professionals from across the Global North and Global South in June 2025 revealed that a lack of skills and resources to effectively prevent and manage conflict severely undermines the sector's impact. 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.**

The overwhelming consensus from survey respondents is that conflict within NGOs and social movements, both internally and externally, is pervasive. Qualitative responses indicated that conflict is deeply disruptive across multiple dimensions.

At the individual level the most common impact cited was stress, frustration, and resentment (over 70%). Many respondents also experienced disillusionment or apathy and feelings of isolation and burnout were frequently mentioned, with some **35% of individuals reporting they had to take sick leave** as a result. This shows that interpersonal and intra-organisational conflict doesn't just impact team dynamics—it profoundly affects people's mental health.

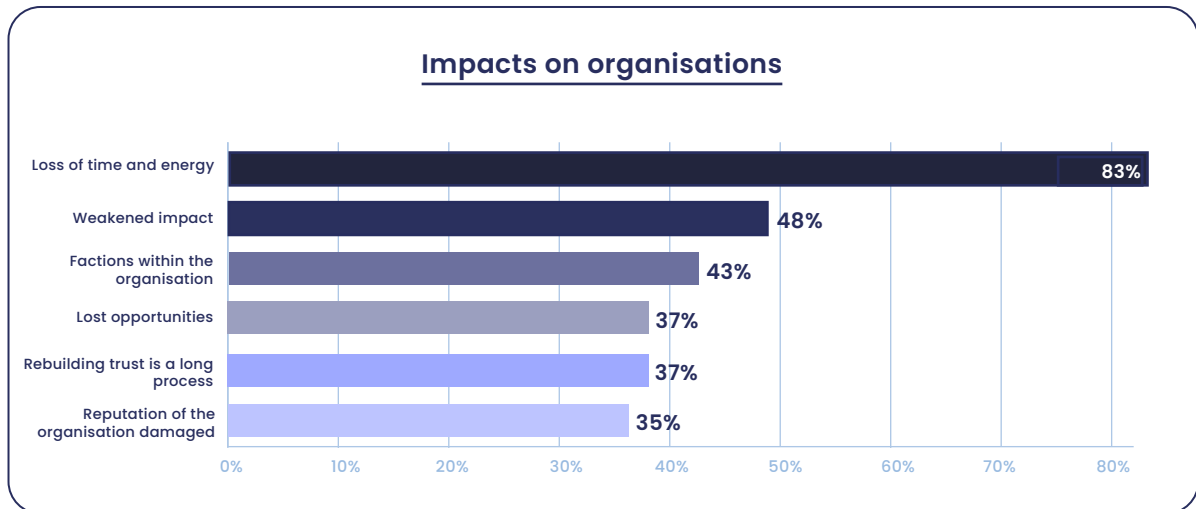
Respondents widely believed that long-lasting conflicts endure due to a lack of systemic change. Nearly 60% referenced a belief that "people/systems will not change" as the main cause of prolonged conflict. Others pointed to loss of autonomy through compromise, and about 25% noted that **"remaining in conflict can sometimes preserve individual power or autonomy"**.

The loss of time and headspace to protracted conflicts, along with the costs of sick leave and severance, is **likely to exact a serious toll on financial sustainability** of many organisations. Conversely, the experiences and insights shared as part of this research demonstrate that better conflict management would yield improved interpersonal relationships, reduced stress, increased wellbeing, and a stronger commitment to joint purpose.



The costs of unresolved conflicts

...for organisations



At the organisational level conflict was described as a drain on time, energy, and resources (83%), with the majority of respondents also reporting **weakened impact, and reputational damage** (48%). Another ubiquitous problem was the **development of factions within organisations** (43 percent), leading to fragmented teams and deteriorating internal trust (38%).

Another repeated theme was the time-consuming nature of rebuilding trust (37%), which often far outlasts the conflict itself. Additionally, missed opportunities— be it funding, partnerships, or strategic initiatives— were frequently listed as tangible losses.

When asked what should be prioritised in the immediate aftermath of a conflict between organisations, a majority (55%) ranked “repairing internal relationships” as their top priority.

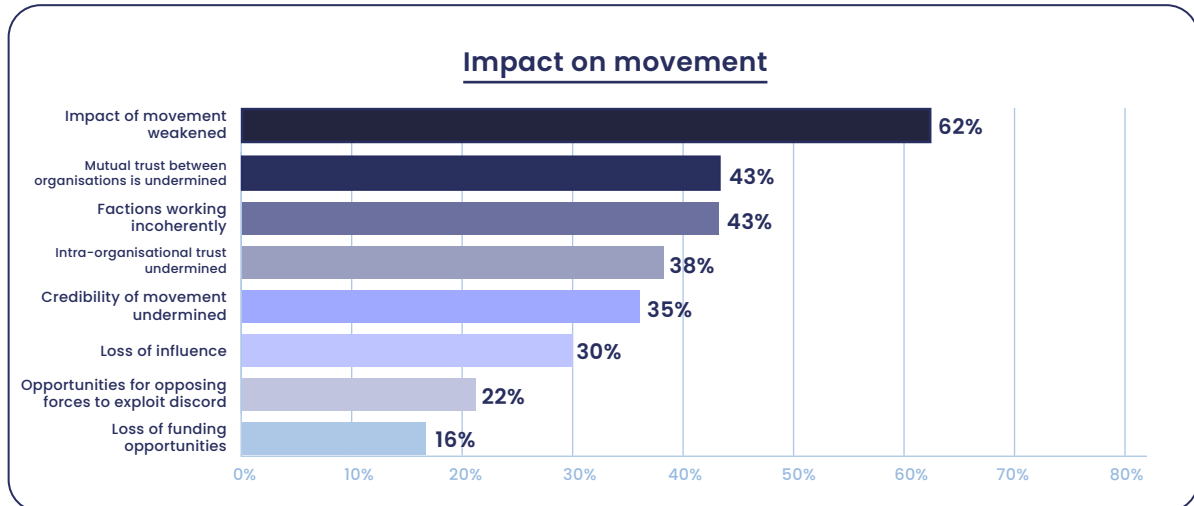
Importantly, it was widely-recognised that **civil society organisations often replicate the very issues they aim to solve externally** (e.g. bigotry, colonialism, exclusion). Some 65% recognised this tendency, citing cases of discrimination, wage inequities, and marginalisation of Global South staff. Several respondents described neo-colonial leadership models, where Global North staff dominate decisions under the guise of localisation or decolonisation before addressing external disputes.

When asked about the potential organisational benefits that would flow from more effective conflict management support, the most commonly cited opportunities were more effective decision-making, strengthened strategic consistency, and better organisational health. It should also be noted that, given the very significant drain on time and resources occasioned by unaddressed conflict – including the high costs of sick leave and severance disbursements – **better management of the issue would also substantially improve financial sustainability.**



The costs of unresolved conflicts

...for movements



When looking at broader movement impact, responses highlighted a pattern of incoherence and fragmentation. Many referred to the **weakening of their movement's collective impact** (62%), with some specifically citing loss of influence in advocacy spaces or policymaking forums. Credibility was often said to be undermined, particularly when conflicts played out publicly or went unresolved over long periods. Several responses emphasised how **conflict created opportunities for external forces to exploit divisions, which further weakened their movements' cohesion and strategic direction**.

Importantly, some responses contextualised conflicts as being driven by underlying structural issues — including neo-colonial mindsets, inequitable power dynamics, and contradictions between formal values and internal practices. These deeper sources of conflict suggest that one-off technical fixes may not be enough; **what's needed are changes in how individuals and organisations relate to each other**.

The most commonly cited barrier to entering a resolution process was “doubt that it can work,” which was reported by over 70% of respondents. This lack of faith in resolution processes often stemmed from previous failed attempts or absence of trustworthy facilitation mechanisms. Other frequent barriers included “uncertainty about who will support your position” (around 50%) and “time or capacity constraints” (approx. 40%).

While there is no comprehensive data available regarding the cost internal conflict exacts on civil society as a whole, whether in terms of impact or sustainability, it was universally recognised that the problem is chronic, pervasive and devastating. Across all responses, there was consensus that improved conflict resolution would yield very substantial benefits. For movements as a whole, respondents envisioned **greater scope for long-term strategic alignment, increased legitimacy, and much greater impact**.



How conflicts unfold

Even well-intentioned missions can fracture under pressure.

Unspoken conflicts do not disappear; they erode trust, weaken commitment, and derail purpose. While some conflict is healthy, without skilful dialogue, it quickly turns toxic.

Stanford University Professor Shirzad Chamine notes that communication operates on two channels: The data channel and the emotional channel.

We refer to these two aspects of interpersonal workspace relationships as:

Dynamics

The impact of interpersonal interactions on an emotional and psychological level.

Mechanics

The impact of interactions in terms of management, structures, processes, and governance

In pre-interviews for conflict interventions, these involved often fixate on governance and processes, overlooking the real challenge: relational complexity.

While well-designed systems can mitigate tensions for a time, in a fast-changing world people need to develop greater interpersonal intelligence to match the complexity in which we live.

Hence, the need to increase our capacity to hold opposing polarities, engage in critical dialogue with multiple stakeholders and resolve conflicts faster than we have done in the past.

Conflicts unfold in many ways. Our experience of resolving deep-rooted tensions in the private sector over the past 15 years has revealed three critical phases:

1. Pre-conflict

2. Active conflict

3. Chronic/late-stage conflict



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. Signals may be subtle: avoidance, frustration, or doubt, as the conflict has not yet been openly expressed. There is a lack of urgency to openly communicate in this phase.

At the surface

- Issues are left unaddressed.
- Managers frequently change priorities, undermining clarity.
- Decision avoidance and operational delays.

Below the surface

- Inability to hold strategic dialogues and make trade-offs gives rise to tension, as decisions may not be considered optimal by all.
- Internal dissent is silenced rather than being engaged with, reducing psychological safety.
- Due to inability to confront issues directly, disagreement is displaced into protracted consultations, narratives of external blockage.

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. Signals visible as open disagreement, confrontation, and the parties focusing on positions rather than on understanding underlying causes.

At the surface

- Absence of problem escalation.
- Undermining people's competence.
- Abrasive behaviour goes unaddressed.

Below the surface

- Conflict is managed covertly through withdrawal rather than resolution.
- Power struggles are framed as technical objections.
- Managers don't address dysfunctional behaviours due to importance of certain competencies.

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—patterns of blame, hostility, or disengagement with units are present.

At the surface

- Absence of recognition.
- Role implementation blocked.
- Resignation threats/departure.

Below the surface

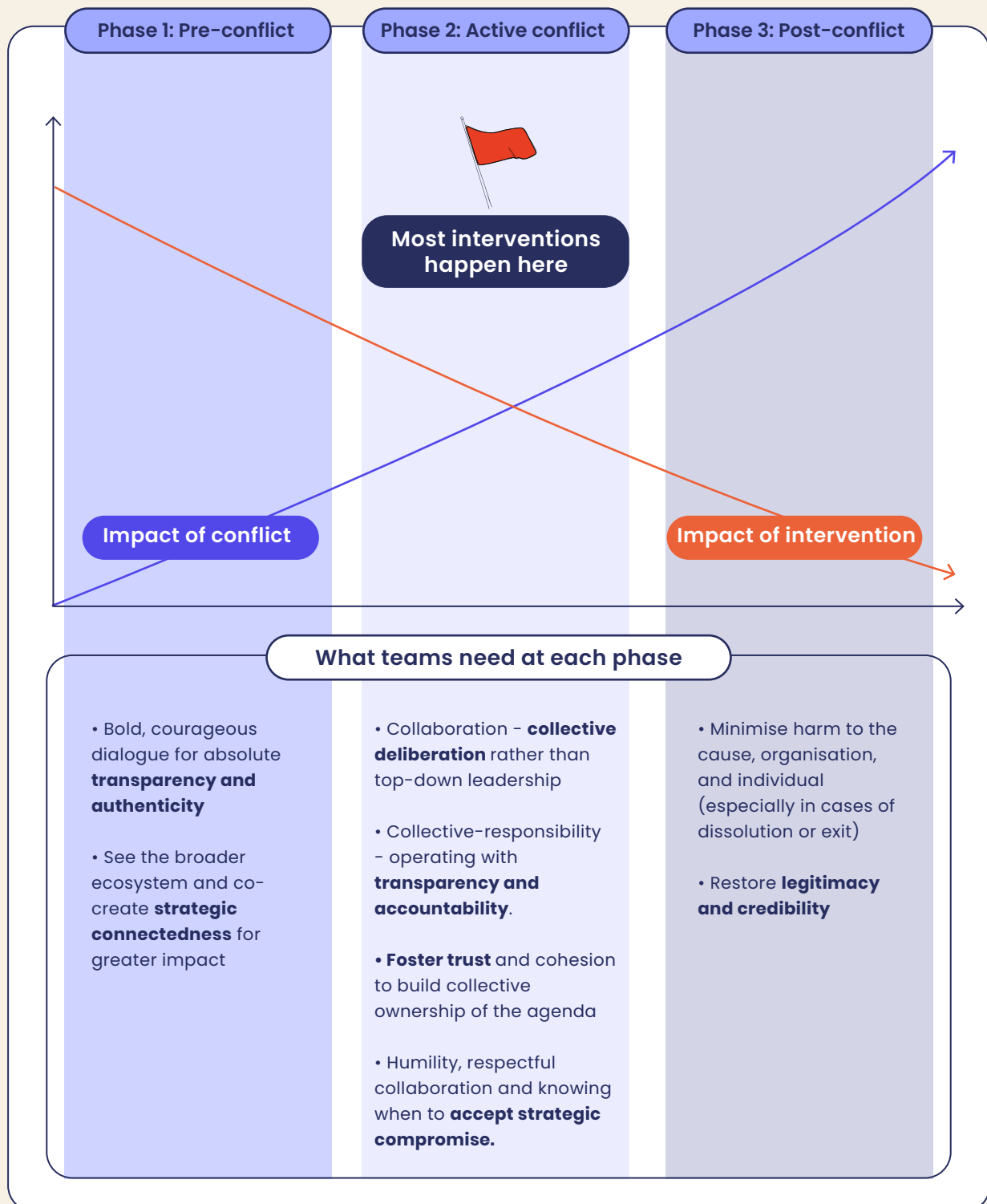
- Lack of acknowledgement of contribution while addressing exit terms and conditions.
- Impacted individual challenged in (enmeshed) spheres of individual identity, organisational role, and public profile.
- Disaccord treated as operational issues rather than relational and reputational.



Finding the opportunity in conflict

Understanding impact, needs and transforming outcomes

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





The potential of conflict resolution

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.

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 individuals

Reduced stress, improved well-being, increased confidence.



To the organisation

Stronger collaboration, efficiency, alignment with values, enhanced leadership and governance.



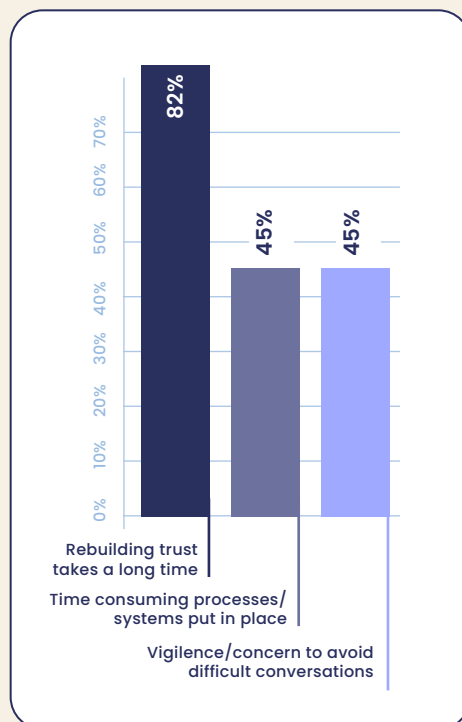
To the movement

Stronger cohesion & harmony, increased impact, reputation, sustainability.

When asked what factors might have facilitated better resolution of past conflicts they were engaged in, a pronounced majority – **60% – 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.

In an increasingly complex world, in which the forces of regression collaborate with devastating ease, it is **critical that those who fight for a better, fairer, more inclusive world learn to manage conflict more effectively.**



By providing urgently-needed tools, resources and expertise to progressive organisations, Cause and Conflict delivers dramatic improvements in staff wellbeing, organisational cohesion, strategic alignment and financial sustainability, not to mention movement impact.

Conflict shapes the world. Let's shape it wisely.

Let's talk



Our programs

Conflict resolution

Ready to restore trust, collaboration, and effectiveness for greater impact?

- **Mediation and consultancy** to support individuals, organisations, and teams experiencing both internal and external conflict to find resolution and, ultimately, to restore harmonious collaboration.
- 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 conditions for honest dialogues and make breakthroughs, placing both humanity and collective efficacy at the heart of the organisation.

Conflict prevention

Want to forestall the pernicious impacts stemming from unaddressed conflict?

- **Training** to equip participants to hold difficult conversations, regulate emotions in the face of provocation, address tensions, and reduce polarisation. The result is stronger decision-making, healthier collaboration, and organisations able to navigate disagreement without fragmentation.
- **Diagnostics.** Examining the interpersonal, cultural, and strategic dimensions of conflicts to help you understand and address the root causes and patterns that undermine effectiveness and alignment. In many cases, the diagnostic process alone helps restore psychological safety, clarify shared principles, and foster a culture where solidarity and impact thrive.
- **Conflict-conscious strategy facilitation**, building the skills and insight needed to anticipate, navigate, and transform imminent conflict into a source of clarity, alignment, and impact.

Research

C&C is also an ongoing research project.

We anonymise and distil findings and insights from our collaborations to further refine the tools and resources we offer. Together with the [Civil Society Conflict Survey](#) – a living tool which collects insights and experiences from across the sector – this knowledge creation process will feed into an annual report, **‘From Discord to Unity: Conflict in Civil Society’**, elucidating the key drivers of and most effective solutions to conflict in global civil society.





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, 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.

During seven years 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 activist think tank Tax Justice Network, where he has worked extensively in coordinating international human rights and economic justice collaborations.