

Breakout Session D—Organizational Development in Conflict-Affected Areas

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The issue of conflict has become a dominant motif in development. This workshop focused on how to conduct meaningful capacity building in organizations operating in conflict-affected environments. The session included case history presentations, a discussion of networking, identification of emerging themes, and general discussion. A major question was whether all cases are context-specific, or if generalizations can be made.

Case History – East Timor

(Luis Da Costa Ximenes)

- Timor has been independent since 2002, when the war for independence was won. Conflict and poverty remain, and as people rebuild they must coordinate with donors, government, and international organizations.
- Four major challenges have emerged:
 - Transparency: Agreements between donors and recipients are not always clear or adhered to, which affects openness and trust among participants.
 - Lack of rules for NGOs: In the absence of regulation, many organizations create their own structures and standards, which can lead to misunderstandings.
 - Weak political context: The lack of a strong, trusting relationship between civil society and government makes it difficult to build local capacity.
 - Problematic donor roles: When donors impose their own priorities, recipients work to the grant rather than building their own capacity and vision.

Case History – Nepal

(Brian Peniston)

- The Mountain Institute (TMI) works in eastern Nepal to encourage biodiversity and support sustainable livelihoods. Since 1996, conflicts with Maoist insurgents have left 12,000 dead, destroyed communications, and damaged or destroyed infrastructure. The government military response has been heavy-handed, and has often made things worse. NGOs have suffered bombings and kidnappings and have had to adapt to an unstable environment.
- TMI was forced to adapt its development program to this emerging conflict situation. It adopted an “adaptive management approach,” which emphasizes flexibility. To avoid being caught between the Maoists and government security forces, TMI keeps a lower profile. It now hires and trains almost all local staff and has eliminated its expatriate field presence. Decision-making has been placed in the hands of local partners and community organizations, which slows the pace of implementation, but enhances the potential for long-term sustainability.

- TMI has become almost totally transparent, especially in budgeting. Communities work within a budget ceiling, which addresses trust issues and provides a sense of local ownership. This has been critical, because Maoists have demanded project funds to support their efforts. The villagers are better able to refuse these demands than NGOs would be.
- The NGOs in Nepal have created an umbrella organization that has developed standard operating guidelines and procedures. By operating collectively, they can speak with a common voice and can refuse to pay extortion funds.

Networking – West Africa

(Emmanuel Bombande)

- Although West Africa has great natural resources, the countries in this region remain poor due to conflict. War becomes a daily reality that influences how organizations are set up and how credibility is achieved.
- Context and environmental constraints inform how an organization grows and how it responds to conflict. As conflicts increase in West Africa, NGOs are emerging as key players. Organizational development in this environment must take into account history, distrust, and the need for neutral, nonpartisan mediators. Because NGOs can be flexible, innovative, and responsive, they are ideally positioned to be neutral and bring peace.
- Networking is not always the easiest way to work, but it is both a best practice and an effective strategy for conflict-affected areas.
 - The combined expertise of member organizations leads to effective programs.
 - Networking allows NGOs to minimize duplication of efforts, maximize resources, increase leverage, and draw the attention of policymakers.
 - Networks provide cross-fertilization, which enables NGOs to share experiences and integrate staff development so that there is consistent management across organizations.
 - Networking provides clear roles for local, regional, and national organizations, which fosters efficiency and organizational growth.
 - In multi-sectoral programs, networks provide opportunities for everyone to play a part.

Discussion

The facilitator asked if participants could begin to differentiate between general strategies and tactics. The discussion resulted in the following observations:

- Trust and credibility (social capital) are fundamental and must be assumed to be absent in virtually all post-conflict OD efforts. Every possible device should be sought to deepen these within and between organizations. In a similar way, enabling environments are fragile, corruption is widespread and insecurity pervades most aspects of NGO activity; OD strategies should be designed to reflect these considerations and to address them wherever possible.

- In conflict, prone and fragile environments, OD and governance have important roles to play inter-organizationally, as well as within individual organizations. Host country governments are typically very weak in such countries. This requires the NGO community to be self-organizing, self-regulating and to perform many of the functions governments might perform in other settings. Sometimes this involves creation of boundary-spanning mechanisms, such as task forces, networks and APEX groups, and sometimes individual organizations take the lead on behalf of the overall NGO community.
- The panelists spoke of the need for flexibility, innovation and contingency planning when doing OD in conflict settings, but also stressed the importance – particularly in the absence of effective host country rules and institutions – of clearly articulated, codified and agreed sector-wide principles and standards for NGOs. For example, it was noted that broad agreements among all NGOs not to pay extortion to rebels increased the ability of individual organizations to resist the pressure to make such payments.
- Context is critical in all development efforts but is particularly so in conflict-prone environments. Simple transfer and replication of interventions from other settings is almost never viable in these settings.
- Systematic and locally-informed analysis of the root causes of conflict and sources of conflict vulnerability are essential for all OD efforts in conflict-prone settings, even if the intervention’s primary intent is not conflict prevention, management or mitigation. In doing such analysis, particular care should be taken when assigning labels. For example, what some call a religious conflict might be better understood as a conflict over resources. In addition, organizations may think they are nonpartisan, but they may be perceived as being aligned with a particular side.
- “Neutrality” is a very elusive concept. Some suggested that “even-handedness” or “balance” were more realistic goals. It was suggested by several that networks and alliances – a “big tent” -- can be effective mechanisms for achieving this balance even in settings where individual organizations are assumed to have biases on one side or the other of a conflict.
- Ironically, conflict sometimes requires international NGOs to accelerate the application of international best practices on issues such as budget transparency, community ownership, flexibility and self-reliance.
- Gender issues are particularly important in conflict-prone settings but are often neglected in both program delivery and organizational development efforts.
- Insecurity affects many aspects of day-to-day operations and needs to be reflected in organizations’ management systems and procedures. For example, if staff members cannot get into their offices, there should be provisions for them to work from home. Transparency helps with security, as does a clear demarcation such that individual workers can be identified with specific programs.
- Training programs (e.g., overtraining), staffing configurations (e.g., double-encumbering), and process documentation (e.g., clear manuals) need to anticipate the reality of high turnover in personnel in conflict-affected areas.

- Although most people emphasized the importance of international actors taking a low profile when doing OD or service provision in conflict-prone settings, examples were also cited where a high profile international presence provided needed legitimacy or protection for local actors.
- Conflict normally ebbs and flows in unpredictable ways. OD efforts are most likely to be effective if they are flexible enough to respond to periodic windows of opportunity.