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Not All Conflicts Are Bad. An examination of Constructive Conflicts in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda

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Abstract: Conflict is commonly perceived as a negative phenomenon within organizations because of its association with tension, disagreement, reduced productivity, and strained interpersonal relationships. However, not all organizational conflicts are destructive. When appropriately managed, conflict can stimulate critical thinking, improve decision-making, promote accountability, encourage innovation, and strengthen organizational relationships. This study examined constructive conflicts within non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kamuli District, Uganda, with particular attention to how disagreements among employees, managers, and teams can contribute positively to organizational effectiveness. The study adopted a qualitative case-study approach to explore the experiences, perceptions, and management practices associated with constructive workplace conflict. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 participants (including executive directors, program managers, project officers, and finance staff) from four selected NGOs, two focus group discussions comprising 12 participants, and document review involving organizational policies and meeting minutes. The findings revealed that constructive conflict significantly enhanced the quality of organizational decisions by challenging assumptions, exposing weaknesses in proposed strategies, and creating opportunities for alternative solutions. Participants reported that disagreements regarding resource allocation, program implementation approaches, and accountability mechanisms frequently produced innovative solutions and strengthened organizational systems. The study further established that the outcome of conflict depends less on the existence of disagreement and more on how employees and leaders respond to it. Organizations characterized by psychological safety, respectful communication, participatory leadership, emotional maturity, and effective conflict-management mechanisms were more likely to transform disagreements into opportunities for learning and organizational development. The study contributes to conflict-management literature by challenging the assumption that organizational conflict is inherently dysfunctional and by demonstrating how constructive disagreement can become a resource for organizational growth in the NGO sector. The study recommends that NGO leaders should adopt conflict-transformation approaches, strengthen psychological safety, provide conflict-management training, and establish formal feedback mechanisms to harness the positive potential of workplace disagreements.

Keywords: *Constructive conflict, organizational conflict, NGOs, conflict management, employee relations, organizational effectiveness, psychological safety, Kamuli District, Uganda*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Conflict is an unavoidable feature of organizational life. Whenever individuals with different backgrounds, experiences, professional orientations, interests, expectations, and responsibilities work together, differences in opinion and approaches are likely to emerge (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are particularly susceptible to workplace disagreements because they often operate in complex environments involving limited

resources, multiple stakeholders, demanding beneficiaries, donor expectations, government regulations, and diverse professional teams (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). The NGO sector in Uganda has experienced significant growth over the past three decades, with organizations operating across various sectors including education, health, livelihoods, child protection, agriculture, governance, and community empowerment (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Mutebi, 2020). This proliferation of NGOs has created dynamic

organizational environments where diverse professionals with different training, values, and approaches must collaborate effectively to achieve development outcomes (Brass, 2012; Bickart, 2014).

Despite the inevitability of conflict, organizational discourse frequently treats conflict as something that should be eliminated or minimized (Amason, 1996; Rahim, 2011). Managers may perceive disagreement as evidence of poor teamwork, disloyalty, insubordination, or organizational dysfunction (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). Employees may similarly avoid challenging colleagues or supervisors because they fear being labelled difficult, uncooperative, or insubordinate (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Such an approach can result in conformity, suppressed concerns, poor decision-making, and the failure to identify organizational weaknesses (Janis, 1982; Nemeth, 1997). When employees remain silent about problems, organizations may continue with ineffective strategies, inefficient resource allocation, or even unethical practices (Milliken et al., 2003; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

The central argument of this study is that not all conflicts are bad. Some disagreements are constructive because they encourage employees to question assumptions, examine alternatives, identify risks, and improve organizational decisions (Amason, 1996; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). A team member who challenges an unrealistic project budget, for example, may initially create disagreement within the team. However, that disagreement may prevent financial mismanagement and improve the project's sustainability (Behfar et al., 2008). Similarly, disagreement over program implementation strategies can lead an NGO team to examine evidence more carefully and develop a more effective intervention (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Edmondson, 2012). Conflict over accountability may expose weaknesses in organizational procedures and encourage stronger systems (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). In these circumstances, conflict is not necessarily a threat to the organization; rather, it becomes an instrument for organizational learning, innovation, and improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990).

The distinction between constructive and destructive conflict is therefore critically important (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011). The critical question is not simply whether conflict exists, but what the conflict is about, how it is expressed, and how organizational actors manage it (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Research has consistently demonstrated that task-related conflicts—disagreements about work content, procedures, and decisions—can be beneficial when managed appropriately, while relationship conflicts—disagreements based on personal animosity—are almost always destructive (Amason, 1996; De Wit et al., 2012; Behfar et al., 2008).

This study examines constructive conflict among NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda. It seeks to understand the circumstances under which disagreement becomes beneficial rather than destructive and how NGO leaders and employees can transform conflict into an opportunity for organizational improvement. By focusing on the NGO sector in a Ugandan district context, the study contributes to the growing body of

literature on organizational conflict in developing country settings and provides practical insights for NGO leaders, managers, and policymakers seeking to harness the positive potential of workplace disagreements.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Many organizations attempt to prevent workplace conflict because conflict is often associated with employee dissatisfaction, interpersonal hostility, reduced morale, and organizational instability (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Rahim, 2011). Consequently, organizational leaders may adopt conflict-avoidance strategies that discourage employees from questioning decisions or expressing alternative opinions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003). However, excessive avoidance of disagreement can also create significant organizational problems. Employees may remain silent about weaknesses in projects, inappropriate management decisions, resource inefficiencies, or unrealistic organizational expectations (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). In such circumstances, apparent harmony may conceal significant organizational problems that eventually undermine organizational effectiveness, sustainability, and impact (Janis, 1982; Argyris & Schön, 1996).

NGOs in Kamuli District operate within environments that require collaboration, accountability, innovation, resource management, and responsiveness to community needs (Bickart, 2014; Brass, 2012). These conditions inevitably create differences in opinions and priorities among employees and managers (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). Yet there is limited empirical attention to the possibility that some of these disagreements may actually improve organizational performance (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021). Existing discussions of workplace conflict frequently emphasize conflict prevention, reduction, and resolution (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011). While these approaches remain important, they may overlook the positive functions of appropriately managed disagreement (Amason, 1996; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). There is therefore a need to examine how NGOs can distinguish constructive conflict from destructive conflict and create organizational conditions in which disagreement contributes to learning, accountability, innovation, and improved decision-making (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013).

Furthermore, much of the existing literature on organizational conflict has been conducted in Western organizational contexts, with limited attention to the unique dynamics of NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa (Brass, 2012; Mutebi, 2020). The cultural, institutional, and resource environments within which Ugandan NGOs operate may shape conflict dynamics in ways that differ from those observed in private sector or government organizations in developed countries (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). There is therefore a need for contextually grounded research that examines constructive conflict within the specific organizational and cultural context of Ugandan NGOs. This study addresses this gap by examining constructive conflict in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda, providing empirical evidence on the forms, causes, and consequences of constructive workplace disagreement in this under-researched context.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the nature, causes, and positive organizational outcomes of constructive conflicts in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda.

1.4 Specific Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Examine the major forms of constructive conflict experienced in NGOs in Kamuli District.
2. Identify the organizational factors that contribute to constructive conflict.
3. Examine how constructive conflict influences decision-making and organizational performance.
4. Explore how NGO leaders manage disagreements to produce positive outcomes.
5. Identify factors that transform potentially destructive conflicts into constructive organizational dialogue.
6. Develop recommendations for strengthening constructive conflict management within NGOs.

1.5 Study Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What forms of constructive conflict occur within NGOs in Kamuli District?
2. What factors contribute to constructive conflict among NGO employees?
3. How does constructive conflict influence organizational decision-making?
4. How does constructive conflict contribute to innovation and organizational learning?
5. What leadership practices facilitate constructive disagreement?
6. What factors determine whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study makes several important contributions. First, it contributes to the academic literature on organizational conflict by providing empirical evidence on constructive conflict in a non-Western organizational context—the NGO sector in Uganda. Second, it provides practical insights for NGO leaders, managers, and human resource practitioners on how to create organizational environments that harness the positive potential of workplace disagreement. Third, it contributes to the growing literature on psychological safety and employee voice in organizations, particularly in the context of development organizations operating in complex environments. Fourth, the study provides evidence that can inform NGO policies, training programs, and management practices related to conflict management and organizational learning. Finally, the study contributes to the broader discourse on organizational effectiveness and sustainability in the NGO sector,

demonstrating how constructive conflict can strengthen rather than undermine organizational performance.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Understanding Organizational Conflict

Organizational conflict refers to disagreement arising when individuals or groups perceive incompatibility in their interests, goals, values, opinions, or approaches (Rahim, 2011; Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Conflict may occur between employees, between employees and managers, between departments, or between organizations and external stakeholders (Lewin, 1948; Coser, 1956). Traditional approaches to organizational management often regarded conflict as dysfunctional and something that should be minimized or eliminated (Taylor, 1911; Fayol, 1949). The classical management perspective viewed conflict as a sign of organizational failure, poor management, or employee misconduct (Weber, 1947; Urwick, 1943). Under this view, effective organizations were characterized by harmony, cooperation, and consensus (Barnard, 1938; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939).

Later perspectives, particularly those emerging from organizational behavior research in the 1960s and 1970s, recognized that some degree of disagreement may be beneficial because organizations require diverse perspectives and critical examination of ideas (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973; Pondy, 1967). The interactionist perspective, as articulated by Pondy (1967) and others, argued that conflict is not only inevitable but can be functional for organizational performance (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). This perspective distinguished between functional conflict—disagreement that contributes to organizational goals—and dysfunctional conflict—disagreement that undermines organizational effectiveness (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). The contemporary perspective therefore distinguishes between destructive conflict, which damages relationships and undermines performance, and constructive conflict, which enhances organizational outcomes (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008).

2.2 Constructive Conflict

Constructive conflicts occur when disagreement produces outcomes that benefit individuals, teams, or organizations (Amason, 1996; Tjosvold, 2008). Such conflicts are characterized by respectful communication, issue-focused discussion, openness to alternative perspectives, and a willingness to search for mutually beneficial solutions (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). Constructive conflict does not mean that employees necessarily agree with one another (Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Rather, it means that disagreement is managed in a manner that allows the organization to benefit from different perspectives (Amason, 1996; Behfar et al., 2008; De Wit et al., 2012).

Research has consistently identified several characteristics of constructive conflict (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011; Deutsch, 1973). First, constructive conflict is focused on issues, tasks, and ideas rather than on personalities, relationships, or personal attacks (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Second,

constructive conflict is characterized by open communication and information sharing (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Third, constructive conflict involves active listening and genuine consideration of alternative viewpoints (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Behfar et al., 2008). Fourth, constructive conflict is conducted within a framework of mutual respect and trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006). Finally, constructive conflict is oriented toward problem-solving and organizational improvement rather than winning or domination (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011).

The distinction between constructive and destructive conflict is particularly important in understanding organizational outcomes (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011). Destructive conflict tends to escalate, damage relationships, undermine trust, and reduce organizational effectiveness (Jehn, 1995; De Wit et al., 2012). In contrast, constructive conflict tends to generate new ideas, improve decision quality, strengthen relationships, and enhance organizational learning (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Edmondson, 2012).

2.3 Task Conflict and Relationship Conflict

The scholarly literature on organizational conflict has consistently distinguished between task conflict and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Amason, 1996). Task conflict, also known as cognitive or substantive conflict, concerns differences regarding work assignments, procedures, priorities, strategies, and decisions (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996). When appropriately managed, task conflict can improve organizational decisions because employees are encouraged to examine proposals from different perspectives and challenge assumptions (Eisenhardt et al., 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). For example, an NGO project team may disagree about whether resources should be allocated to community training or direct material support. Such disagreement may initially create tension, but the discussion may lead the team to review evidence and develop a more effective resource-allocation strategy (Behfar et al., 2008).

In contrast, relationship conflict, also known as affective or interpersonal conflict, concerns personal incompatibilities, animosity, and interpersonal tensions (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Relationship conflict is almost always destructive to organizational outcomes, damaging team cohesion, reducing satisfaction, and undermining performance (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Research has consistently demonstrated that task conflict and relationship conflict have different antecedents, dynamics, and consequences (Amason, 1996; Behfar et al., 2008). While task conflict can be beneficial when managed constructively, relationship conflict is consistently associated with negative organizational outcomes (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012).

The critical challenge for organizations is therefore to encourage task conflict while minimizing relationship conflict (Behfar et al., 2008; Rahim, 2011). This requires creating organizational conditions in which employees feel safe to express disagreement about work-related issues without fear of personal attack or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). It also requires developing conflict-management skills

that enable employees to separate people from problems, focus on issues rather than personalities, and engage in constructive dialogue (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 2008; Lewicki et al., 2006).

2.4 Constructive Conflict and Innovation

Innovation is critical for organizational survival and effectiveness (West & Farr, 1990; Anderson et al., 2014). Organizations that fail to innovate may become obsolete, irrelevant, or unable to respond effectively to changing environmental conditions (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Damanpour, 1991). Innovation requires employees to question existing practices, challenge assumptions, and propose new approaches (Amabile, 1988; Anderson et al., 2014). Where employees are afraid to disagree with managers or colleagues, organizations may become resistant to change and unable to adapt to new challenges (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990).

Constructive conflict creates space for alternative ideas and perspectives (Nemeth, 1997; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). An employee who challenges an established procedure may identify a more efficient method of delivering services (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). A team member who questions a conventional approach may stimulate creative thinking and generate innovative solutions (West & Farr, 1990; Anderson et al., 2014). Consequently, disagreement can become a source of innovation when it is managed constructively and when organizational cultures encourage intellectual diversity and respectful challenge (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013).

Research has demonstrated that teams with moderate levels of task conflict tend to be more innovative than teams with either very high or very low levels of conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; De Wit et al., 2012). This suggests an optimal level of disagreement—enough to stimulate creative thinking and critical evaluation, but not so much that it becomes destructive or paralyzing (Amason, 1996; Behfar et al., 2008). For NGOs operating in complex environments requiring adaptive responses to community needs, constructive conflict may be particularly important for generating innovative program approaches (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014).

2.5 Constructive Conflict and Accountability

Accountability is central to organizational effectiveness, particularly in the NGO sector where organizations are accountable to multiple stakeholders including beneficiaries, donors, government authorities, boards, and the general public (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). NGOs must demonstrate responsible use of resources, effective program implementation, and meaningful impact on beneficiary communities (Ebrahim, 2003; Najam, 1996). Accountability sometimes requires employees to challenge decisions, question practices, and raise concerns about potential problems (Morrison, 2011; Edmondson, 1999).

A disagreement regarding expenditure, procurement, reporting, or program implementation can expose weaknesses in organizational systems (Ebrahim, 2003; Fowler, 2013). If such concerns are handled professionally and constructively, conflict can strengthen organizational accountability rather than undermine it (Lewis, 2014; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). For

example, a finance officer who questions a procurement decision may prevent financial mismanagement and strengthen internal controls. A program officer who challenges unrealistic project targets may ensure that the organization maintains its credibility with donors and beneficiaries. An employee who raises concerns about reporting practices may improve organizational transparency and accountability (Ebrahim, 2003; Najam, 1996).

However, accountability-related disagreements can also be destructive if they are handled poorly (Behfar et al., 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Employees who raise legitimate concerns may be labelled troublemakers, insubordinate, or disloyal (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003). In such environments, employees may remain silent about problems, allowing accountability failures to continue or escalate (Morrison, 2011; Edmondson, 1999). The challenge for NGO leaders is therefore to create organizational environments in which employees feel safe to raise concerns and question decisions, while also maintaining mechanisms for constructive conflict resolution (Schein, 2013; Edmondson, 2012).

2.6 Leadership and Constructive Conflict

Leadership plays a central role in determining whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008; Behfar et al., 2008). Leaders who encourage open communication, listen to different opinions, separate people from problems, and focus on evidence are more likely to transform disagreements into productive conversations (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013). Such leaders create psychological safety—an environment in which employees feel able to express concerns, ask questions, challenge ideas, and admit mistakes without fear of humiliation or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012).

Conversely, authoritarian leadership may suppress disagreement (Lewin et al., 1939; Likert, 1967). When employees believe that challenging managers will result in punishment, demotion, or other negative consequences, they may withhold important information, suppress concerns, and avoid expressing alternative perspectives (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003). Such suppression may create apparent organizational harmony while concealing significant problems that eventually undermine organizational effectiveness (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Janis, 1982).

Research has identified several leadership practices that facilitate constructive conflict (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008; Behfar et al., 2008). First, participative leadership—involving employees in decision-making—creates opportunities for respectful disagreement and diverse input (Likert, 1967; Vroom & Yetton, 1973). Second, transformational leadership—inspiring and motivating employees—can create organizational cultures that value learning, innovation, and constructive challenge (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). Third, conflict-management leadership—explicitly teaching and modelling constructive conflict skills—enables employees to disagree productively (Rahim, 2011; Deutsch, 1973). Fourth, emotionally intelligent leadership—understanding and managing emotions—helps leaders navigate the emotional

dimensions of workplace conflict (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997).

In the context of NGOs in Uganda, leadership practices may be influenced by cultural factors, organizational structures, and resource constraints (Brass, 2012; Mutebi, 2020). Understanding how leadership shapes constructive conflict in this specific context is therefore important for developing contextually appropriate recommendations for NGO leaders and managers (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014).

2.7 Psychological Safety and Employee Voice

Psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up without fear of negative consequences—is a critical condition for constructive conflict (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). In psychologically safe environments, employees feel able to express concerns, ask questions, challenge assumptions, admit mistakes, and propose alternative approaches without fear of humiliation or retaliation (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Psychological safety enables constructive conflict by reducing the interpersonal risks associated with disagreement (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013).

Employee voice—the expression of work-related ideas, concerns, and opinions—is closely related to psychological safety (Morrison, 2011; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). When employees perceive that their voice is valued and will not be punished, they are more likely to speak up about problems, suggest improvements, and challenge ineffective practices (Edmondson, 1999; Milliken et al., 2003). Voice is particularly important in NGO contexts where organizational decisions may have direct consequences for vulnerable communities (Lewis, 2014; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Employees who raise concerns about program quality, resource utilization, beneficiary welfare, or organizational sustainability can contribute significantly to organizational effectiveness (Fowler, 2013; Bickart, 2014).

However, employee voice requires supportive organizational conditions (Morrison, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003). Leaders must communicate clearly that employee input is valued, respond constructively to employee concerns, and avoid punishing employees who speak up (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Organizations must also establish formal mechanisms for employee voice, such as feedback systems, suggestion schemes, participation in decision-making, and safe reporting channels (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008). In the absence of such conditions, employees may remain silent, allowing organizational problems to persist or escalate (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Janis, 1982).

2.8 Organizational Conflict in the NGO Sector

NGOs present unique organizational contexts for understanding constructive conflict (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Several characteristics of NGOs shape conflict dynamics in ways that differ from private sector or government organizations (Brass, 2012; Bickart, 2014). First, NGOs often operate with limited resources, creating competition for funding, equipment, staff time, and other organizational resources (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). Scarcity may intensify conflicts

over resource allocation and create disagreements about organizational priorities (Ebrahim, 2003; Najam, 1996).

Second, NGOs are accountable to multiple stakeholders, including beneficiaries, donors, government authorities, boards, and the general public (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Ebrahim, 2003). These multiple accountabilities may create tensions and disagreements about organizational priorities, reporting practices, and program approaches (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). Conflicts may arise between donor requirements and community needs, between organizational sustainability and program quality, or between internal priorities and external expectations (Brass, 2012; Biebart, 2014).

Third, NGOs often employ professionals from diverse backgrounds, including development practitioners, technical specialists, community mobilizers, and administrative staff (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). Professional diversity can create constructive disagreement as employees bring different perspectives, expertise, and approaches to organizational problems (Amason, 1996; Behfar et al., 2008). However, professional diversity can also create relationship conflict if not managed constructively (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

Fourth, NGOs operate in complex environments involving community dynamics, government relations, donor expectations, and evolving development challenges (Brass, 2012; Biebart, 2014). This complexity requires organizational adaptability, learning, and innovation, all of which may be enhanced by constructive conflict (Edmondson, 2012; Argyris & Schön, 1996). Organizations that effectively harness constructive disagreement may be better positioned to adapt to changing circumstances and respond effectively to community needs (Senge, 1990; West & Farr, 1990).

2.9 Research Gap and Contribution

Despite the growing recognition of constructive conflict's potential benefits, there remains limited empirical research on this phenomenon in the NGO sector, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa (Brass, 2012; Mutebi, 2020). Most research on organizational conflict has been conducted in private sector or government organizations in Western contexts (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012). There is therefore a need for contextually grounded research that examines constructive conflict within the specific organizational and cultural context of Ugandan NGOs (Okello, 2021; Mutebi, 2020).

Furthermore, much of the literature on conflict in NGOs has focused on inter-organizational conflict, stakeholder conflict, or conflict between NGOs and government (Brass, 2012; Biebart, 2014). There is comparatively less attention to intra-organizational conflict—disagreement among employees and managers within NGOs (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). Understanding intra-organizational constructive conflict is important because organizational effectiveness depends on how employees and managers work together to achieve organizational objectives (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Behfar et al., 2008).

This study addresses these gaps by examining constructive conflict in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda. By focusing on intra-organizational conflict among NGO employees and managers, the study provides empirical evidence on the forms, causes, and consequences of constructive workplace disagreement in the Ugandan NGO sector. The study contributes to both academic literature and practical knowledge about how NGOs can harness the positive potential of workplace conflict to enhance organizational effectiveness and sustainability.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Functional Conflict Perspective, Social Exchange Theory, and Psychological Safety Theory. These perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how conflict can become constructive within organizations and how organizational conditions shape conflict outcomes.

3.1 Functional Conflict Perspective

The Functional Conflict Perspective, originally articulated by Coser (1956) and later developed by Deutsch (1973), Pondy (1967), and others, proposes that conflict can have positive consequences when it stimulates discussion, innovation, critical evaluation, and organizational adaptation. This perspective challenges traditional assumptions that conflict is inherently dysfunctional and destructive (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). Instead, it recognizes that conflict serves important organizational functions, including promoting diverse perspectives, challenging groupthink, identifying organizational weaknesses, and stimulating innovation (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997).

The Functional Conflict Perspective distinguishes between functional conflict—disagreement that contributes to organizational goals—and dysfunctional conflict—disagreement that undermines organizational effectiveness (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). Functional conflict is characterized by issue-focused discussion, respectful communication, and problem-solving orientation (Amason, 1996; Tjosvold, 2008). Dysfunctional conflict is characterized by personal attacks, escalating hostility, and relationship damage (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). The perspective emphasizes that the same disagreement can become either functional or dysfunctional depending on how it is managed (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011).

For this study, the Functional Conflict Perspective provides the foundational assumption that conflict in NGOs can be constructive and beneficial when appropriately managed. The perspective guides the examination of conditions under which conflict produces positive organizational outcomes, including improved decision-making, innovation, accountability, and organizational learning. The perspective also informs the study's focus on distinguishing constructive from destructive conflict and identifying factors that enable constructive outcomes.

3.2 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory, as developed by Blau (1964), Homans (1958), and others, emphasizes the importance of reciprocal relationships within organizations. The theory proposes that social relationships are governed by norms of reciprocity—individuals expect that their contributions to relationships will be balanced by returns from others (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In organizational contexts, Social Exchange Theory suggests that employees develop relationships with organizations and colleagues based on perceived fairness, trust, and mutual benefit (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006).

When employees experience fairness, respect, and trust in their organizational relationships, they are more likely to engage in positive organizational behaviours, including expressing disagreement and challenging ideas without interpreting it as a personal attack (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Conversely, when employees perceive unfairness, disrespect, or untrustworthiness in organizational relationships, they may withdraw, remain silent, or engage in destructive conflict behaviours (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008). Social Exchange Theory therefore suggests that the quality of organizational relationships shapes conflict dynamics and outcomes (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006).

For this study, Social Exchange Theory informs the examination of how trust, fairness, and reciprocal relationships influence constructive conflict in NGOs. The theory suggests that organizations characterized by positive social exchange relationships—where employees feel valued, respected, and fairly treated—are more likely to experience constructive conflict. Conversely, organizations characterized by negative social exchange relationships—where employees feel exploited, disrespected, or unfairly treated—are more likely to experience destructive conflict. The theory guides the study's examination of organizational factors that contribute to constructive conflict.

3.3 Psychological Safety Theory

Psychological Safety Theory, as developed by Edmondson (1999, 2012), proposes that psychological safety—the belief that one can speak up without fear of negative consequences—is essential for organizational learning and effectiveness. Psychological safety provides an environment in which employees feel able to express concerns, admit mistakes, ask questions, and challenge ideas without fear of humiliation, retaliation, or damage to their reputation (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). Psychological safety is distinct from trust, which concerns expectations about others' behaviour, while psychological safety concerns expectations about the interpersonal consequences of speaking up (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 2013).

Research has demonstrated that psychological safety is associated with a range of positive organizational outcomes, including employee voice, organizational learning, innovation,

and performance (Edmondson, 2012; Morrison, 2011). Psychological safety enables constructive conflict by reducing the interpersonal risks associated with disagreement (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 2013). When employees feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to express alternative perspectives, challenge assumptions, and engage in constructive disagreement (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003). When psychological safety is lacking, employees may remain silent, suppress concerns, and avoid disagreement, potentially allowing organizational problems to persist or escalate (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Janis, 1982).

For this study, Psychological Safety Theory provides a framework for understanding how organizational environments shape conflict dynamics and outcomes. The theory guides the examination of how psychological safety enables constructive conflict by reducing the interpersonal risks associated with disagreement. The theory also informs the study's focus on leadership practices and organizational conditions that create or undermine psychological safety in NGOs.

3.4 Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

These three theoretical perspectives are complementary and mutually reinforcing. The Functional Conflict Perspective provides the foundational assumption that conflict can be constructive and beneficial. Social Exchange Theory provides insights into how organizational relationships shape conflict dynamics. Psychological Safety Theory provides a framework for understanding how organizational environments enable or constrain constructive disagreement.

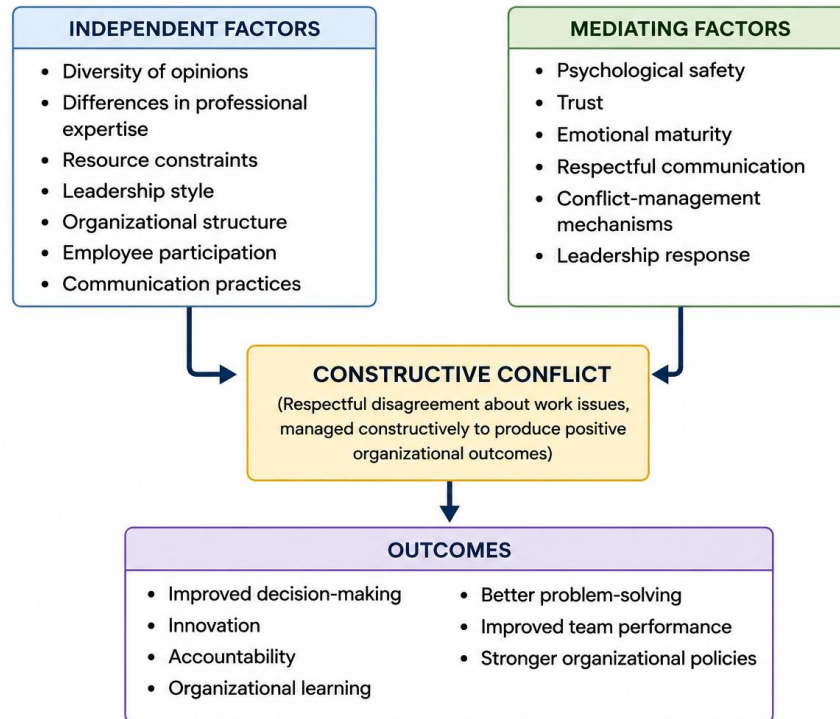
Together, these perspectives suggest that constructive conflict is most likely to occur when:

1. Organizations recognize and value the positive potential of conflict (Functional Conflict Perspective);
2. Organizations are characterized by positive social exchange relationships, including trust, fairness, and mutual respect (Social Exchange Theory); and
3. Organizations create psychologically safe environments where employees feel safe to express disagreement without fear of negative consequences (Psychological Safety Theory).

These theoretical perspectives informed the study's research questions, data collection, and analysis. They provide a lens for interpreting findings and understanding how constructive conflict can be promoted in NGO organizational contexts.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study conceptualizes constructive conflict as being influenced by several organizational conditions and producing specific organizational outcomes. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Constructive Conflict in NGOs**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Constructive Conflict in NGOs**

The framework assumes that the presence of disagreement alone does not determine whether conflict is beneficial. The organizational environment—including mediating factors such as psychological safety, trust, emotional maturity, respectful communication, conflict-management mechanisms, and leadership response—determines whether conflict produces constructive or destructive outcomes.

Independent Factors: These are organizational conditions that create potential for conflict. Diversity of opinions and professional expertise creates intellectual diversity that can generate productive disagreement (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996). Resource constraints create competition that can generate conflict over resource allocation (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). Leadership style shapes how conflict is managed and whether disagreement is encouraged or suppressed (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008). Organizational structure influences communication patterns and decision-making processes that shape conflict dynamics (Pondy, 1967; Jehn, 1995). Employee participation and communication practices create opportunities for voice and disagreement (Morrison, 2011; Edmondson, 1999).

Mediating Factors: These are organizational conditions that determine whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive. Psychological safety enables employees to express disagreement without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). Trust creates confidence that others will respond constructively to disagreement (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006). Emotional maturity enables employees to manage the

emotional dimensions of conflict (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Respectful communication enables issue-focused discussion without personal attacks (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011). Conflict-management mechanisms provide processes for addressing disagreements constructively (Behfar et al., 2008; Rahim, 2011). Leadership response shapes how disagreement is addressed and whether constructive outcomes are achieved (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013).

Outcomes: These are the positive organizational results of constructive conflict. Improved decision-making occurs when diverse perspectives are considered and assumptions are challenged (Amason, 1996; Eisenhardt et al., 1997). Innovation occurs when disagreement stimulates creative thinking and alternative approaches (West & Farr, 1990; Anderson et al., 2014). Accountability occurs when employees raise concerns about organizational practices (Ebrahim, 2003; Fowler, 2013). Organizational learning occurs when disagreements lead to reflection, adaptation, and improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990). Better problem-solving occurs when diverse perspectives enable more comprehensive solutions (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; De Wit et al., 2012). Improved team performance occurs when constructive conflict enhances team effectiveness (Behfar et al., 2008; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Stronger organizational policies occur when disagreements lead to improved procedures and practices (Lewis, 2014; Edwards & Hulme, 1996).

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative case-study design. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research seeks

to understand employees' experiences and perceptions of constructive conflict within their organizational contexts (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods enable researchers to explore complex social phenomena in depth, capturing participants' perspectives, meanings, and interpretations (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The case-study design is particularly appropriate for examining organizational phenomena because it enables in-depth investigation of a bounded system (the NGO) and the contextual factors that shape organizational dynamics (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). By examining four NGOs as multiple cases, the study enables comparison across organizations while maintaining the depth and richness of qualitative inquiry (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2014).

5.2 Study Area

The study was conducted among four selected NGOs operating in Kamuli District, Uganda. Kamuli District is located in the Eastern Region of Uganda, approximately 120 kilometres from Kampala, the capital city. The district has a population of approximately 500,000 people, predominantly engaged in subsistence agriculture (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Kamuli provides an appropriate context for the study because NGOs contribute significantly to community development in areas such as education, health, livelihoods, child protection, agriculture, governance, and community empowerment (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021). The district is home to a diverse range of local and international NGOs, providing a rich organizational context for examining workplace conflict dynamics.

5.3 Selection of NGOs

Four NGOs were purposively selected for inclusion in the study based on several criteria. First, selected NGOs had been operational in Kamuli District for at least five years, ensuring organizational stability and experience with workplace dynamics. Second, selected NGOs had at least 15 employees, providing sufficient organizational complexity for examining workplace conflict. Third, selected NGOs represented diverse sectors including health, education, livelihoods, and child protection, enabling variation in organizational context. Fourth, selected NGOs demonstrated willingness to participate in the study and provide access to employees and organizational documents. The four NGOs included:

NGO A: An international NGO focusing on maternal and child health, employing approximately 45 staff members.

NGO B: A national NGO focusing on education and livelihoods, employing approximately 30 staff members.

NGO C: A local NGO focusing on child protection and community development, employing approximately 20 staff members.

NGO D: An international NGO focusing on agriculture and food security, employing approximately 35 staff members.

5.4 Participants

Participants included employees and managers from the four selected NGOs. The study targeted individuals involved in

organizational decision-making and with direct experience of workplace disagreements. Participants included:

- NGO executive directors (4 participants)
- Program managers (8 participants)
- Project officers (10 participants)
- Field officers (6 participants)
- Finance and administration staff (2 participants)
- Human resource personnel (2 participants)

Inclusion Criteria: Participants were included if they: (a) had been employed by the NGO for at least one year; (b) had direct experience with workplace disagreements or conflict; (c) were involved in organizational decision-making; and (d) provided voluntary informed consent to participate.

Exclusion Criteria: Participants were excluded if they: (a) had less than one year of employment with the NGO; (b) had no direct experience with workplace conflict; or (c) declined to provide informed consent.

5.5 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to select participants with direct experience of workplace disagreements and conflict-management processes (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). This sampling strategy was appropriate because the study sought to understand the experiences of individuals who had directly experienced constructive conflict in their organizations. The sampling process involved several steps. First, each NGO's executive director was contacted and the study was explained. Second, the executive director identified potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Third, the research team contacted potential participants individually, explained the study, and invited participation. Fourth, participants who agreed to participate were scheduled for interviews or focus group discussions.

Snowball sampling was also used as a supplementary strategy (Patton, 2015). After initial interviews, participants were asked to recommend other colleagues who had relevant experience with workplace conflict. This approach helped identify participants who might not have been identified through initial purposive sampling and provided additional perspectives on organizational conflict dynamics.

5.6 Sample Size and Saturation

The final sample comprised 32 individual interview participants and 12 focus group participants (across two focus groups). Sample size was determined by data saturation—the point at which additional data collection no longer generated new insights or themes (Guest et al., 2006; Morse, 1995). Data saturation was achieved after approximately 25 interviews, with the remaining interviews confirming and elaborating previously identified themes. The focus group discussions similarly reached saturation after two groups, with the second group largely confirming themes identified in the first group. The sample size of 32 interview participants and 12 focus group participants is consistent with qualitative research guidelines,

which suggest that saturation is typically achieved with 20-40 interviews for qualitative studies (Guest et al., 2006; Creswell, 2014).

5.7 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through three primary methods: semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document review. These multiple methods enabled triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Semi-Structured Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 participants. Interviews followed a flexible interview guide that explored participants' experiences with workplace disagreements, examples of conflicts that produced positive outcomes, leadership responses to disagreement, and organizational changes resulting from disagreements (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2015). The interview guide was developed based on the study objectives, theoretical framework, and literature review. Interview questions were open-ended, allowing participants to share their experiences and perspectives in their own words (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English, which is the working language of NGOs in Uganda. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Focus Group Discussions: Two focus group discussions were conducted, each comprising 6 participants. Focus groups included participants from different NGOs to enable discussion of common experiences and diverse perspectives (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Focus groups were particularly useful for exploring shared organizational norms, collective experiences of conflict, and group dynamics (Morgan, 1997). Focus group discussions were guided by a focus group protocol, lasted approximately 90 minutes each, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim.

Document Review: Organizational documents were reviewed to provide contextual information about organizational structures, policies, and conflict management mechanisms (Bowen, 2009). Documents reviewed included:

- Organizational policies and procedures manuals (particularly HR policies)
- Meeting minutes (especially team meetings where disagreements were documented)
- Annual reports and strategic plans
- Organizational charts and structure documents

Document review enabled triangulation of interview and focus group data and provided insights into organizational context that informed interpretation of findings (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

5.8 Data Collection Period

Data collection was conducted over a period of three months, from [Month] to [Month], 2026. This timeframe allowed for scheduling interviews and focus groups, reviewing documents,

and conducting iterative analysis while data collection was ongoing (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2014).

5.9 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). Thematic analysis is appropriate for examining experiences and perceptions of constructive conflict and for identifying common themes across participants and organizations.

The analysis followed six phases as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006):

Phase 1: Familiarization with Data. Interview transcripts, focus group transcripts, and document review notes were read and re-read to gain familiarity with the data. Initial impressions and observations were noted.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes. Data were systematically coded to identify relevant features. Coding was inductive, allowing codes to emerge from the data rather than imposing predetermined categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Both semantic codes (explicit content) and latent codes (underlying meanings) were identified.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes. Codes were grouped into potential themes by examining patterns, similarities, and relationships among codes. Themes were developed based on the research questions and theoretical framework, as well as unexpected patterns that emerged from the data.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes. Potential themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they were internally coherent and distinct from other themes. Themes were checked against the dataset to ensure they accurately represented participant experiences and perceptions.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes. Each theme was defined and refined, identifying its essence and scope. Theme names were developed to capture the content and significance of each theme.

Phase 6: Producing the Report. The final themes were presented in the findings section, supported by participant quotations and evidence. The analysis linked themes to research questions and theoretical framework.

Coding Procedure: Coding was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Initial coding was conducted by the primary researcher, with a sample of transcripts independently coded by a second researcher to ensure inter-coder reliability and consistency (Guest et al., 2012). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consensus. Themes were developed through iterative discussion among the research team.

Potential themes identified during analysis included:

- Disagreement as a source of innovation
- Conflict and accountability
- Constructive criticism

- Leadership openness
- Psychological safety
- Conflict transformation
- Employee participation
- Organizational learning

5.10 Trustworthiness and Credibility

Several strategies were employed to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

Credibility: Credibility was enhanced through multiple strategies. Prolonged engagement in the field (three months) enabled the research team to understand the organizational context. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, focus groups, document review) and methods (multiple participants, multiple NGOs) provided comprehensive evidence. Member checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with participants to ensure accuracy and resonance. Peer debriefing was conducted with colleagues and supervisors throughout the analysis process.

Transferability: Transferability was enhanced through thick description of the research context, participants, and findings (Geertz, 1973; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich descriptions enable readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. The study also provides information about NGO characteristics and Kamuli District context to enable transferability judgments.

Dependability: Dependability was enhanced through transparent documentation of the research process, including data collection, analysis, and interpretation procedures. An audit trail was maintained, including interview guides, coding schemes, and analytical memos (Merriam, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability: Confirmability was enhanced through reflexivity—acknowledging the researcher's positionality and potential biases (Patton, 2015). The research team maintained reflective journals documenting assumptions, decisions, and interpretations throughout the research process. Findings were grounded in participant evidence rather than researcher preconceptions.

5.11 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical research protocols in accordance with institutional research ethics guidelines (Mertens, 2015; Israel & Hay, 2006).

Ethical Approval: Ethical approval was obtained from the [Institution Name] Research Ethics Committee, reference number [Reference Number], dated [Date]. Permission to conduct research was also obtained from the Ugandan National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST), reference number [Reference Number].

Informed Consent: All participants were provided with detailed information about the study purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. Written informed consent was obtained from all

participants before data collection. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Confidentiality: Participants' confidentiality was ensured through anonymization of data. Participant identifiers were removed from transcripts and findings. Pseudonyms were used for participants and NGOs in reporting. Data were stored securely on password-protected computers accessible only to the research team.

Anonymity: Participants were guaranteed anonymity in all research outputs. NGO names were not disclosed, and individual participants were not identifiable in findings.

Voluntary Participation: Participation was entirely voluntary. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question and could withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences.

Protection from Harm: The study was designed to minimize any potential harm to participants. Participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with their employers or colleagues. All participants were provided with contact information for the research team in case they had any concerns.

Beneficence: The study was designed to benefit participants by providing insights that could improve organizational practices. Participants were offered summary reports of findings at the conclusion of the study.

6. FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study, organized according to the research questions and themes that emerged from the data. The findings are based on interviews with 32 participants, two focus group discussions, and document review from four NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda.

6.1 Forms of Constructive Conflict in NGOs

The study found that constructive conflict in NGOs takes several forms, primarily related to task and work-related issues. Participants identified three major forms of constructive conflict: disagreement over resource allocation, disagreement over program implementation approaches, and disagreement over accountability mechanisms.

6.1.1 Disagreement Over Resource Allocation

Participants consistently reported that disagreements about resource allocation often produced constructive outcomes. NGO A's Program Manager (P03) explained:

"When we were planning our annual budget, there was significant disagreement between program staff who wanted to allocate more resources to community training and finance staff who wanted to allocate more to direct material support. The debate was intense at first, but it forced us to examine our assumptions and evidence more carefully. Ultimately, we developed a more balanced approach that combined both strategies, and our impact

assessment showed better outcomes than the previous year."

A Finance Officer from NGO B (P07) provided a similar perspective:

"I remember a situation where I challenged a procurement decision because I believed it wasn't the most cost-effective option. Initially, the program manager was frustrated because it delayed the procurement process. But when we reviewed the evidence together, we found a more efficient supplier that saved the organization significant resources. The program manager later thanked me for raising the concern because it strengthened our financial accountability."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P04) added:

"Resource disagreements are common in our organization, especially when we're planning new projects. What makes them constructive is when people focus on the evidence and the organizational objectives rather than personal interests. When we argue about what will work best for beneficiaries, that's productive. When we argue about who gets what resources, that can become destructive."

6.1.2 Disagreement Over Program Implementation Approaches

Participants identified disagreements over program implementation as another major form of constructive conflict. These disagreements arose when employees had different views about how to design and deliver programs.

NGO C's Project Officer (P12) shared:

"We had a project that was struggling to achieve its targets. During our team meeting, there was significant disagreement about whether to continue with the existing approach or try something new. Some colleagues wanted to maintain the approach and try harder, while others felt we needed a fundamental change. The debate was uncomfortable, but it led us to review our evidence more systematically. We eventually adopted a hybrid approach that incorporated insights from both perspectives, and our performance improved significantly."

NGO D's Executive Director (P02) reflected:

"I've learned that when my team members disagree about implementation approaches, it's often because they have important insights that I might not see. I used to feel threatened by disagreement, but now I've come to value it. When people challenge my ideas, it forces me to think more carefully and consider alternatives I might have overlooked. Some of our most

effective programs emerged from disagreements about how to approach a particular challenge."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P05) explained:

"In our organization, we've learned to distinguish between healthy disagreement about approaches and unhealthy personal conflict. Healthy disagreement is about ideas, strategies, and evidence. Unhealthy conflict is about personalities, blame, and personal attacks. We've developed a culture where team members can challenge each other's ideas without it becoming personal. This has made our team stronger."

6.1.3 Disagreement Over Accountability Mechanisms

Participants identified disagreements about accountability as a form of constructive conflict that strengthened organizational integrity.

NGO A's Human Resources Officer (P15) reported:

"One of the most constructive conflicts I experienced involved a staff member who raised concerns about our reporting practices. Some managers felt the staff member was being difficult and questioning authority. But when we investigated the concerns, we found legitimate issues with our reporting that needed to be addressed. The staff member's willingness to speak up strengthened our accountability systems and improved our relationship with donors."

NGO C's Field Officer (P16) shared:

"I challenged my supervisor about a community engagement approach that I thought was not appropriate. The supervisor was initially defensive because she had designed the approach. But when I presented evidence from the community, she listened and we modified the approach. The community was more receptive to the modified approach, and we achieved better outcomes. The supervisor later told me she appreciated my honesty and commitment to quality."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P08) added:

"I think the most important form of constructive conflict in our organizations is when employees are willing to speak up about concerns, even when it's uncomfortable. This could be concerns about how money is being spent, how programs are being implemented, or how staff are being treated. When employees stay silent because they're afraid of speaking up, that's when problems accumulate and organizations become ineffective."

6.2 Organizational Factors Contributing to Constructive Conflict

Participants identified several organizational factors that contribute to constructive conflict in NGOs.

6.2.1 Leadership Openness and Participatory Leadership

Leadership openness was consistently identified as the most important factor enabling constructive conflict. Participants emphasized that leaders who listen, encourage dialogue, and value different perspectives create conditions for constructive disagreement.

NGO B's Executive Director (P01) shared:

"I've learned that if I want my team to challenge ideas and bring up concerns, I need to create an environment where that's welcomed. I make a conscious effort to thank people who speak up, even when I disagree with them. I want my team to know that I value their input, even when it's critical. This has made our decision-making stronger and our team relationships healthier."

NGO C's Program Manager (P08) explained:

"Our executive director has created a culture where speaking up is not just allowed but encouraged. We have regular team meetings where everyone is invited to share their perspectives, and the director actively invites disagreement. When people express concerns, the director listens carefully and genuinely considers them. This has built trust and made our organization more effective."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P02) added:

"The difference between organizations where conflict is constructive and organizations where it's destructive often comes down to leadership. When leaders are open to feedback and willing to consider alternative views, conflict tends to be productive. When leaders are defensive and resistant to challenge, conflict tends to become destructive."

6.2.2 Psychological Safety

Psychological safety was identified as a critical factor enabling constructive conflict. Participants described psychologically safe environments as those where employees feel able to express concerns without fear of negative consequences.

NGO D's Project Officer (P13) shared:

"I feel safe speaking up in my organization because I know that my colleagues and managers will listen respectfully, even if they disagree with me. I've seen colleagues challenge decisions and be thanked for their input. I've never seen anyone punished or marginalized for speaking up. This creates an environment where people are honest about their concerns."

NGO A's Field Officer (P10) explained:

"Early in my career, I worked at an organization where challenging a manager was dangerous. People who spoke up were labelled troublemakers and eventually pushed out. I learned to stay silent, even when I saw problems. At my current NGO, it's completely different. When I raise a concern, it's treated seriously and addressed. I feel safe to express my views, even when they're unpopular."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P06) reflected:

"Psychological safety is essential for constructive conflict. When employees don't feel safe, they stay silent. And when they stay silent, organizations don't learn. The most effective organizations I've worked for are those where employees feel safe to raise concerns, admit mistakes, and challenge assumptions."

6.2.3 Respectful Communication and Trust

Participants emphasized that constructive conflict requires respectful communication and trust among colleagues.

NGO B's Finance Staff (P05) shared:

"We have an organizational norm that we disagree about ideas, not about people. We've learned to challenge proposals without attacking individuals. This makes disagreement less threatening and more productive. I can disagree with a colleague about how to approach a project, but we remain respectful and ultimately work together effectively."

NGO C's Project Officer (P14) explained:

"Trust is essential for constructive conflict. When I trust my colleagues, I'm more willing to express disagreement because I believe they'll respond constructively. When trust is low, people tend to avoid conflict or engage in destructive behaviours. Our organization invests in building relationships and trust through team-building activities, transparent communication, and fair treatment of employees."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P08) added:

"Respectful communication is the foundation of constructive conflict. When communication breaks down and becomes disrespectful, conflict becomes destructive. Organizations need to teach employees how to communicate respectfully during disagreements, and leaders need to model respectful communication."

6.3 Influence of Constructive Conflict on Decision-Making and Organizational Performance

Participants consistently reported that constructive conflict improved decision-making and organizational performance.

6.3.1 Improved Decision Quality

Participants explained that constructive conflict improves decision quality by challenging assumptions, exposing weaknesses, and generating alternative solutions.

NGO A's Program Manager (P04) shared:

"One of the most significant benefits of constructive conflict is that it improves the quality of our decisions. When team members challenge proposals, it forces us to think more carefully, examine evidence, and consider alternatives. The decisions we make after constructive debate are almost always stronger than the decisions we would have made without debate."

NGO D's Field Officer (P17) reported:

"I've seen how disagreement can improve decisions. In our team, when someone challenges an approach, we examine the evidence and consider alternatives. The discussion may be uncomfortable, but the final decision is usually better than the initial proposal. We've made many improvements to our programs through this process of constructive challenge."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P10) elaborated:

"Decisions that are made without disagreement are often decisions that haven't been fully examined. When everyone agrees too quickly, it may mean that people are afraid to speak up or that the team is suffering from groupthink. In our organization, we've learned to welcome constructive disagreement because it helps us make more informed decisions."

6.3.2 Enhanced Innovation

Participants reported that constructive conflict stimulated innovation by creating space for alternative ideas and creative solutions.

NGO B's Executive Director (P01) explained:

"Some of our most innovative ideas have emerged from disagreements. When people with different perspectives and expertise debate a problem, they often generate creative solutions that no one would have thought of individually. Innovation requires people to challenge existing practices and propose new approaches. Constructive conflict creates the space for that challenge."

NGO C's Program Manager (P09) shared:

"In our organization, we've found that constructive conflict is essential for innovation. When employees feel safe to challenge existing practices and propose new approaches, we get more creative solutions. One of our most successful innovations—a community-based

approach to child protection—emerged from a disagreement about whether traditional approaches were effective."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P04) reflected:

"Innovation requires diversity of thought. When everyone thinks the same way, you get conventional solutions. When people disagree respectfully, you get creative alternatives. Organizations that want to innovate need to welcome constructive conflict."

6.3.3 Strengthened Accountability

Participants reported that constructive conflict strengthened organizational accountability by enabling employees to raise concerns about organizational practices.

NGO A's Finance Officer (P06) explained:

"When employees feel safe to raise concerns about financial management, program implementation, or organizational practices, they strengthen accountability. I've seen instances where a staff member's concern about procurement prevented mismanagement and improved organizational integrity. Constructive conflict plays an important role in accountability."

NGO D's Human Resources Officer (P18) shared:

"Accountability requires employees to speak up about concerns, even when it's uncomfortable. Organizations that suppress disagreement may appear harmonious, but they may also be concealing problems. Constructive conflict enables organizations to identify and address problems before they become serious."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P11) added:

"The most effective NGOs I've worked for are those where employees feel able to challenge decisions and raise concerns. This creates a culture of accountability where problems are addressed rather than ignored. Constructive conflict is essential for organizational integrity."

6.4 Leadership Practices Facilitating Constructive Disagreement

Participants identified several leadership practices that facilitate constructive disagreement in NGOs.

6.4.1 Active Listening

Participants emphasized that leaders who actively listen to employees' concerns create conditions for constructive conflict.

NGO B's Field Officer (P11) shared:

"Our manager is an excellent listener. When I bring up a concern, she gives me her full attention, asks clarifying questions, and genuinely considers my perspective. Even when

she disagrees with me, I feel heard and respected. This makes me more willing to speak up and share my views."

NGO C's Executive Director (P02) explained:

"I've learned that listening is more important than talking when it comes to conflict. When employees feel that their concerns are heard, they're more willing to express disagreement constructively. I make a conscious effort to listen carefully to my team members, even when I disagree with them."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P09) reflected:

"Leaders who listen create an environment where employees feel valued and respected. This encourages people to speak up and share their views. Leaders who don't listen create an environment where employees stay silent and problems accumulate."

6.4.2 Separating People from Problems

Participants emphasized the importance of distinguishing between personal relationships and work-related disagreements.

NGO A's Program Manager (P03) shared:

"We have a rule in our team: challenge ideas, not people. When we disagree about work-related issues, we focus on the evidence and the organizational objectives. We don't attack individuals or make it personal. This helps us maintain positive relationships even when we have strong disagreements about work issues."

NGO D's Project Officer (P14) explained:

"I've learned that it's possible to disagree with a colleague about work while maintaining a positive relationship. The key is to focus on the issue, not the person. When we critique ideas rather than individuals, disagreements become productive rather than destructive."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P03) added:

"The best leaders I've worked with are those who separate people from problems. They recognize that disagreement about work issues doesn't mean there's a problem with the relationship. This allows teams to engage in constructive conflict while maintaining healthy working relationships."

6.4.3 Modeling Constructive Conflict

Participants emphasized that leaders must model constructive conflict behaviours for their employees.

NGO B's Executive Director (P01) shared:

"I think it's important for leaders to model the behaviours they want to see. If I want my team to engage in constructive conflict, I need to

show them what that looks like. I try to model respectful communication, openness to alternative perspectives, and willingness to admit when I'm wrong."

NGO C's Program Manager (P08) explained:

"Our leader sets the tone for how conflict is handled in our organization. When she disagrees with someone, she does so respectfully and focuses on the issue. She's open to being challenged and admitted when she's made mistakes. This creates a culture where constructive conflict is valued and practiced."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P06) reflected:

"Leaders who model constructive conflict are more effective than leaders who just talk about it. When employees see their leaders engaging in respectful disagreement and being open to challenge, they're more likely to do the same. Leadership by example is essential for creating a culture of constructive conflict."

6.5 Factors Determining Whether Conflict Becomes Constructive or Destructive

Participants identified several factors that determine whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive.

6.5.1 Psychological Safety and Trust

Participants consistently identified psychological safety and trust as key factors determining conflict outcomes.

NGO A's Executive Director (P01) explained:

"The most important factor determining whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive is psychological safety. When employees feel safe to express disagreement without fear of negative consequences, conflict tends to be constructive. When employees feel unsafe, they either avoid conflict entirely or engage in destructive behaviours."

NGO D's Field Officer (P10) added:

"Trust is essential for constructive conflict. When I trust my colleagues, I'm more willing to express disagreement and receive disagreement constructively. When trust is low, conflict tends to become destructive."

6.5.2 Emotional Maturity and Communication

Participants identified emotional maturity and respectful communication as important factors shaping conflict outcomes.

NGO B's Finance Staff (P07) shared:

"When people can manage their emotions during disagreements, conflict tends to be constructive. When emotions escalate and become personal, conflict becomes destructive. Our organization has provided training on emotional intelligence

and communication, which has helped staff manage conflict more constructively."

NGO C's Project Officer (P12) explained:

"Respectful communication is essential. When people communicate respectfully during disagreements, even strong disagreements can be productive. When communication breaks down and becomes disrespectful, conflict becomes destructive."

6.5.3 Leadership Response

Participants emphasized that leadership response is one of the most important factors determining conflict outcomes.

NGO B's Project Officer (P11) shared:

"The leader's response to conflict is crucial. When leaders listen, facilitate dialogue, and focus on issues, disagreements are more likely to be constructive. When leaders respond defensively, punish dissent, or personalize criticism, constructive disagreement can escalate into destructive interpersonal conflict."

NGO D's Executive Director (P02) reflected:

"How I respond to conflict as a leader shapes the outcome. If I respond with openness and curiosity, conflict tends to be constructive. If I respond defensively or punitively, conflict tends to be destructive. I've learned that my response as a leader has a significant impact on how conflict plays out in my organization."

Focus Group Participant (FG1-P09) added:

"The same disagreement can become constructive or destructive depending on how leaders respond. If a leader listens, considers the concern, and addresses it constructively, the conflict is likely to produce positive outcomes. If the leader ignores the concern or punishes the person who raised it, the conflict is likely to become destructive."

6.6 Constructive Conflict and Organizational Learning

Participants reported that constructive conflict contributed to organizational learning by revealing weaknesses, generating insights, and promoting reflection.

NGO C's Human Resources Officer (P19) explained:

"Constructive conflict has helped our organization learn and improve. When disagreements reveal weaknesses in our procedures, we review what happened, identify gaps, and modify our practices. Conflict becomes a learning opportunity rather than merely an interpersonal problem."

NGO A's Program Manager (P04) shared:

"We've formalized the learning process after disagreements. When we have a significant disagreement about a work issue, we do a 'after-action review' where we discuss what happened, what we learned, and what we would do differently. This has helped us transform conflict into organizational learning."

Focus Group Participant (FG2-P10) added:

"Organizations that learn from conflict are more effective than those that avoid conflict or suppress it. When conflict reveals problems, organizations have an opportunity to address those problems and improve. The challenge is creating organizational processes that enable learning from conflict."

7. DISCUSSION

7.1 Constructive Conflict as an Organizational Resource

The findings of this study challenge the assumption that successful organizations are organizations without conflict. An organization characterized by complete agreement may not necessarily be healthy. It may instead indicate conformity, fear, poor communication, or suppression of alternative perspectives (Janis, 1982; Argyris & Schön, 1996). As Amason (1996) observed, the absence of conflict in organizations may actually be a sign of groupthink—a phenomenon where the desire for harmony overrides the realistic appraisal of alternatives, leading to poor decision-making.

This study's findings align with the Functional Conflict Perspective (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973) by demonstrating that conflict can serve important organizational functions when appropriately managed. The participants in this study provided numerous examples of how disagreement over work issues—resource allocation, program implementation approaches, and accountability mechanisms—produced positive organizational outcomes. These findings are consistent with research by Jehn (1995), Amason (1996), and Eisenhardt et al. (1997) who found that task conflict can improve decision quality, stimulate innovation, and enhance organizational performance.

For NGOs in Kamuli District, constructive disagreement may be particularly important because organizational decisions often have direct consequences for vulnerable communities. As Edwards and Hulme (1996) and Fowler (2013) have argued, NGOs must maintain accountability to multiple stakeholders and ensure that their programs are effective. Employees who question decisions that may affect program quality, resource utilization, beneficiary welfare, and organizational sustainability serve an important accountability function. This study's finding that constructive conflict strengthens accountability aligns with the work of Ebrahim (2003) and Najam (1996), who emphasized the importance of internal accountability mechanisms in NGOs.

7.2 The Distinction Between Constructive and Destructive Conflict

The study's findings emphasize that the distinction between conflict existence and conflict management is central to understanding organizational outcomes. As Deutsch (1973) and Rahim (2011) argued, the objective should not always be to eliminate conflict. Instead, organizations should seek to create conditions in which disagreement remains respectful, evidence-based, issue-focused, and solution-oriented. This perspective changes the role of conflict management. Rather than treating conflict management only as a mechanism for ending disagreement, managers can use it as a mechanism for transforming disagreement into organizational learning and improvement.

This study's findings on the factors that determine whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive align with existing research. Jehn (1995) and De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found that task conflict—disagreement about work issues—can be beneficial, while relationship conflict—disagreement based on personal animosity—is consistently destructive. This study similarly found that when conflict focused on work issues and was managed respectfully, it tended to be constructive. When conflict became personal or was managed poorly, it became destructive.

The role of leadership in shaping conflict outcomes, as identified in this study, is consistent with the work of Rahim (2011), Tjosvold (2008), and Behfar et al. (2008). These scholars have argued that leaders play a central role in determining whether conflict becomes constructive or destructive. Leaders who encourage open communication, listen to different opinions, and focus on evidence are more likely to transform disagreements into productive conversations. Conversely, authoritarian leaders who suppress disagreement may create apparent organizational harmony while concealing significant problems (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003).

7.3 Psychological Safety and Employee Voice

The study's finding that psychological safety is essential for constructive conflict is consistent with Edmondson's (1999, 2012) research on psychological safety and organizational learning. When employees feel safe to express concerns, admit mistakes, and challenge assumptions, organizations are better positioned to learn, innovate, and perform effectively (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Psychological safety enables constructive conflict by reducing the interpersonal risks associated with disagreement (Schein, 2013; Edmondson, 2012).

The study's findings also align with research on employee voice by Morrison (2011), Morrison and Milliken (2000), and Milliken et al. (2003). These scholars have documented the importance of employee voice for organizational effectiveness and the barriers that prevent employees from speaking up. In the context of NGOs in Kamuli District, employees who raised concerns about accountability, program quality, and resource utilization performed an important voice function. Their willingness to speak up strengthened organizational learning and accountability.

However, the study also found that employees sometimes remained silent about concerns because they feared negative consequences. This finding is consistent with research by Milliken et al. (2003), who identified fear of retaliation, fear of damaging relationships, and belief that speaking up would be futile as barriers to employee voice. Creating psychologically safe environments where employees feel able to speak up requires intentional effort by organizational leaders and the establishment of formal voice mechanisms (Edmondson, 2012; Morrison, 2011).

7.4 Leadership and Constructive Conflict

This study's findings on the importance of leadership for constructive conflict are consistent with existing literature on leadership and conflict management (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008; Behfar et al., 2008). Participants consistently identified leadership openness, active listening, participatory leadership, and modeling of constructive conflict behaviours as essential leadership practices. These findings align with research by Edmondson (2012) on leadership and psychological safety, and by Schein (2013) on leadership and organizational culture.

The study found that leaders who create psychologically safe environments—where employees feel able to express disagreement without fear of negative consequences—are more likely to experience constructive conflict (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 2013). Leaders who model respectful communication, separate people from problems, and respond constructively to disagreement set the tone for organizational conflict dynamics. Conversely, leaders who respond defensively, punish dissent, or personalize criticism may inadvertently encourage avoidance of conflict or destructive conflict behaviours.

The finding that participatory leadership—involving employees in decision-making—enables constructive conflict aligns with research by Likert (1967), Vroom and Yetton (1973), and others on participative leadership. When employees are involved in decision-making, they have more opportunities to express their views and challenge decisions constructively. Participatory leadership also builds trust and commitment, which facilitates constructive conflict.

7.5 Contextual Factors and Constructive Conflict

The study's findings highlight the importance of contextual factors in shaping conflict dynamics in NGOs. The NGO sector in Uganda, as described by Lewis (2014), Fowler (2013), and Brass (2012), presents unique characteristics that shape conflict dynamics. Limited resources create competition that can generate conflict over resource allocation (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). Multiple accountabilities create tensions and disagreements about organizational priorities (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Ebrahim, 2003). Professional diversity creates intellectual diversity that can generate productive disagreement (Amason, 1996; Behfar et al., 2008).

The study also found that cultural factors shaped conflict dynamics. Participants described communication norms, expectations about authority, and cultural attitudes toward disagreement that influenced how conflict was expressed and managed. This finding aligns with research by Hofstede (1980)

and others on the cultural dimensions of organizational behaviour. Understanding cultural context is therefore important for developing effective conflict management approaches in Ugandan NGOs.

7.6 Theoretical Implications

The study's findings have several theoretical implications. First, the findings support the Functional Conflict Perspective (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973) by demonstrating that conflict can produce positive organizational outcomes when appropriately managed. The study provides empirical evidence that conflict can be functional rather than dysfunctional, challenging traditional assumptions about organizational conflict.

Second, the findings support Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) by demonstrating the importance of trust, fairness, and reciprocal relationships for constructive conflict. Organizations characterized by positive social exchange relationships—where employees feel valued, respected, and fairly treated—were more likely to experience constructive conflict. This finding suggests that building positive organizational relationships is essential for enabling constructive conflict.

Third, the findings support Psychological Safety Theory (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012) by demonstrating the importance of psychological safety for constructive conflict. Employees who felt psychologically safe were more willing to express disagreement, challenge assumptions, and engage in constructive conflict. Organizations that create psychologically safe environments are better positioned to harness the positive potential of workplace conflict.

Fourth, the study contributes to the growing body of literature on organizational conflict in the NGO sector (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013; Brass, 2012). By examining constructive conflict in Ugandan NGOs, the study provides empirical evidence from a context that has been underrepresented in the conflict literature. The findings highlight the unique characteristics of NGOs that shape conflict dynamics and suggest the need for contextually appropriate conflict management approaches.

7.7 Unique Contribution

The study contributes to organizational conflict theory by emphasizing the transformative potential of constructive conflict in NGOs operating within a Ugandan district context. While conflict-management literature frequently emphasizes conflict prevention, resolution, and reduction (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011), this study shifts attention toward circumstances under which conflict should be harnessed rather than eliminated. The study therefore proposes that organizational conflict should be understood along a continuum:

Constructive Path:

Difference → Disagreement → Constructive Conflict → Learning/Innovation

Destructive Path:

Difference → Disagreement → Destructive Conflict → Escalation

The critical variable is how organizational actors respond to disagreement. This continuum provides a conceptual contribution that extends existing frameworks for understanding organizational conflict.

The study also makes a contribution by providing empirical evidence on constructive conflict in a non-Western organizational context. The NGO sector in Uganda presents unique characteristics—limited resources, multiple accountabilities, professional diversity, and complex operating environments—that shape conflict dynamics in ways that may differ from private sector or government organizations in Western contexts. By examining constructive conflict in this specific context, the study contributes to the development of more culturally and contextually grounded theories of organizational conflict.

7.8 Implications for Policy and Practice

The study has several implications for policy and practice in NGOs. First, organizations should avoid treating every disagreement as misconduct or organizational disloyalty. Instead, organizations should recognize that some forms of disagreement can be constructive and beneficial. Policies should distinguish between constructive disagreement (challenging ideas, raising concerns, proposing alternatives) and destructive behaviours (personal attacks, harassment, and misconduct). Organizations should develop policies and procedures that encourage constructive disagreement while addressing destructive conflict.

Second, organizations should establish formal mechanisms that enable employees to raise concerns safely. This could include:

- Formal feedback mechanisms (suggestion boxes, employee surveys, town hall meetings)
- Open-door leadership policies that encourage employees to speak with managers
- Team reflection meetings where employees can discuss concerns
- Grievance procedures that protect employees who raise concerns
- Mediation mechanisms for addressing conflicts constructively
- Employee participation in decision-making processes
- Policies protecting employees who raise legitimate concerns (whistleblower protection)

Third, organizations should invest in conflict management training. Managers and employees should receive training in:

- Active listening and respectful communication
- Mediation and negotiation skills
- Emotional intelligence and self-awareness
- Conflict transformation and resolution
- Separating people from problems
- Evidence-based decision-making

Fourth, organizations should strengthen psychological safety. Leaders should communicate clearly that employee input is valued, respond constructively to employee concerns, and avoid punishing employees who speak up. Organizational cultures should encourage respect, trust, and openness.

Fifth, organizations should develop learning mechanisms. After significant disagreements, teams should conduct reflective discussions to identify lessons and determine whether organizational practices need to change. Conflict should be treated as an opportunity for learning and improvement rather than as something to be suppressed.

7.9 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the study focused on four NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda. The findings may not be generalizable to all NGOs in Uganda or to organizations in other sectors or contexts. The small sample size (four NGOs) limits the transferability of the findings.

Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data from employees and managers. Participants may have been influenced by social desirability bias, memory limitations, or other factors that affect the accuracy of their accounts. The study attempted to address this limitation through triangulation of data sources and methods.

Third, the study employed a cross-sectional design, capturing participants' experiences at a single point in time. Longitudinal research would be needed to examine how constructive conflict evolves over time and how organizational conditions change.

Fourth, the study focused on positive outcomes of conflict. While this was intentional—the study sought to examine constructive conflict—it may have resulted in a partial view of conflict dynamics. Future research should examine both constructive and destructive conflict to understand the full range of conflict outcomes.

Fifth, the study was conducted in English, which is the working language of NGOs in Uganda but may not be participants' first language. This may have affected the richness of participant responses. The study attempted to address this limitation by using culturally appropriate interview techniques.

7.10 Suggestions for Future Research

Several directions for future research are suggested. First, longitudinal research examining how constructive conflict evolves over time and how organizational conditions change would provide insights into the dynamics of constructive conflict. Panel studies that follow organizations over time would be valuable.

Second, quantitative research testing the relationships identified in this study—between psychological safety, leadership practices, and constructive conflict outcomes—would complement the qualitative findings. Surveys that measure conflict types, psychological safety, and organizational outcomes would enable statistical analysis.

Third, comparative research examining constructive conflict across different organizational contexts—NGOs, government agencies, private sector organizations—would enable analysis of contextual influences on conflict dynamics. Cross-sectoral comparisons would contribute to the development of more generalizable theories of constructive conflict.

Fourth, research examining the role of culture in shaping conflict dynamics would contribute to more culturally grounded understanding. Cross-cultural studies that examine how cultural norms influence conflict expression and management would be valuable.

Fifth, research examining the relationship between constructive conflict and organizational outcomes—such as organizational performance, innovation, and sustainability—would provide evidence of the practical importance of constructive conflict. Studies that link conflict processes to measurable organizational outcomes would strengthen the case for investing in constructive conflict.

Sixth, research examining interventions that promote constructive conflict—such as conflict management training, leadership development programs, and organizational change initiatives—would provide practical guidance for organizations seeking to harness the positive potential of workplace conflict. Intervention studies that evaluate the effectiveness of specific conflict management approaches would be valuable.

8. CONCLUSION

Conflict should not automatically be regarded as a disease that organizations must eliminate. In NGOs in Kamuli District, disagreement may become a valuable organizational resource when it is managed constructively. This study has demonstrated that constructive conflict can challenge weak assumptions, improve decisions, strengthen accountability, stimulate innovation, and promote organizational learning. The problem is therefore not necessarily the existence of conflict but the manner in which conflict is expressed, interpreted, and managed.

The study has revealed that several organizational conditions enable constructive conflict, including psychological safety, trust, respectful communication, and participatory leadership. Leaders who create these conditions and model constructive conflict behaviours are more likely to transform disagreements into opportunities for learning and improvement. Conversely, organizations that suppress conflict or fail to manage it constructively may miss opportunities for learning and improvement.

The study also revealed that constructive conflict takes several forms in NGOs, including disagreements over resource allocation, program implementation approaches, and accountability mechanisms. These disagreements, when managed constructively, can improve decision quality, stimulate innovation, strengthen accountability, and promote organizational learning. The study found that conflict was most likely to be constructive when it focused on work issues, was managed respectfully, and occurred in environments characterized by psychological safety and trust.

The study concludes that effective NGO leadership should move beyond a narrow conflict-avoidance approach toward a conflict-transformation approach. Leaders should create organizational environments where employees can disagree respectfully, challenge ideas constructively, and participate meaningfully in decision-making. This requires intentional efforts to build psychological safety, develop conflict management skills, and establish formal mechanisms for employee voice.

Ultimately, a healthy organization is not necessarily one in which everyone agrees; it is one in which people can disagree without destroying their relationships or the organization itself. This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of organizational conflict that recognizes its potential benefits while acknowledging its risks. By examining constructive conflict in the NGO sector in Kamuli District, Uganda, the study provides evidence that organizations can harness the positive potential of workplace disagreement to enhance organizational effectiveness, learning, and sustainability.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for NGOs, NGO leaders, and policymakers.

9.1 Promote Constructive Disagreement

NGO leaders should communicate clearly that employees are permitted and encouraged to challenge ideas respectfully. Disagreement should not automatically be interpreted as insubordination, disloyalty, or organizational dysfunction. Organizations should distinguish between constructive disagreement—challenging ideas, raising concerns, proposing alternatives—and destructive behaviours such as personal attacks, harassment, or misconduct. Policies should encourage constructive disagreement while addressing destructive conflict.

Implementation Strategy: Develop clear organizational policies that define constructive and destructive conflict. Communicate these policies to all employees through orientation, training, and regular reminders. Recognize and reward employees who engage in constructive disagreement.

9.2 Train Managers in Conflict Management

Managers should receive comprehensive training in active listening, mediation, emotional intelligence, negotiation, and conflict transformation. Training should be practical and skills-based, enabling managers to apply conflict management skills in their daily work. Leadership development programs should incorporate conflict management as a core competency.

Implementation Strategy: Develop a conflict management training program for all managers and supervisors. Include modules on active listening, mediation techniques, emotional intelligence, and negotiation skills. Provide refresher training annually and incorporate conflict management into leadership development programs.

9.3 Establish Safe Feedback Systems

Organizations should create formal mechanisms through which employees can express concerns without fear of retaliation. These mechanisms may include suggestion boxes, anonymous reporting channels, employee surveys, and regular team meetings where employees can raise concerns. Policies should protect employees who raise legitimate concerns, and organizations should clearly communicate their commitment to protecting whistleblowers.

Implementation Strategy: Establish multiple channels for employee feedback. Implement a whistleblower protection policy. Conduct regular employee surveys to assess psychological safety and employee perceptions of constructive conflict. Act on feedback and communicate actions taken.

9.4 Separate People from Problems

Managers should teach and model the practice of challenging ideas rather than attacking personalities. Employees should learn to critique proposals and approaches constructively, without personal attacks. Communication training should emphasize the importance of statements such as "I disagree with this approach because..." rather than personal accusations.

Implementation Strategy: Incorporate "separate people from problems" principles into organizational communication norms. Provide training on constructive communication during conflict. Model this behaviour in leadership meetings and team interactions.

9.5 Encourage Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Disagreements should be resolved through evidence, organizational objectives, professional standards, and stakeholder needs rather than through personal power, hierarchy, or coercion. Organizations should cultivate a culture of evidence-based decision-making where proposals are evaluated based on their merits. Employee participation in decision-making should be encouraged, enabling diverse perspectives to inform organizational decisions.

Implementation Strategy: Establish evidence-based decision-making as a core organizational value. Use data and evidence in decision-making processes. Encourage employees to present evidence to support their proposals. Train staff in critical thinking and evidence evaluation.

9.6 Develop Organizational Learning Mechanisms

After significant disagreements, teams should conduct reflective discussions to identify lessons and determine whether organizational practices need to change. Conflict should be treated as an opportunity for learning and improvement rather than as something to be suppressed. Organizations should establish "after-action review" processes for significant decisions and conflicts.

Implementation Strategy: Develop a systematic approach to learning from conflict. Conduct after-action reviews following significant disagreements. Document lessons learned and incorporate them into organizational policies and practices. Share learning across the organization.

9.7 Strengthen Psychological Safety

Employees should feel safe to ask questions, identify mistakes, challenge assumptions, and propose alternative approaches. Leaders should communicate that employee input is valued and respond constructively to employee concerns. Organizations should avoid punishing employees who raise legitimate concerns. Training and development programs should build awareness of psychological safety and its importance for organizational effectiveness.

Implementation Strategy: Implement regular psychological safety assessments. Develop training programs on psychological safety for all employees. Leaders should model behaviours that support psychological safety. Address any retaliation against employees who speak up.

9.8 Promote Participatory Leadership

Leaders should involve employees in decision-making processes, particularly decisions that affect their work and organizational outcomes. Participatory leadership builds trust, commitment, and buy-in while creating opportunities for constructive conflict. Leaders should actively invite employee input and demonstrate that employee perspectives are valued.

Implementation Strategy: Establish participatory decision-making processes. Involve employees in strategic planning, budget development, and program design. Create opportunities for employee input through committees, working groups, and consultation processes.

9.9 Establish Conflict Management Mechanisms

Organizations should develop formal mechanisms for addressing conflict constructively, including grievance procedures, mediation processes, and conflict resolution protocols. These mechanisms should be transparent, accessible, and fair. Employees should be aware of these mechanisms and confident that they will be applied fairly.

Implementation Strategy: Develop comprehensive conflict resolution policies and procedures. Train staff in conflict resolution processes. Establish mediation and grievance mechanisms. Communicate these mechanisms to all employees.

9.10 Invest in Continuous Improvement

Organizations should continuously assess their conflict management approaches and make improvements based on evidence and feedback. Regular employee surveys, conflict audits, and learning reviews should inform organizational policies and practices. Organizations should be willing to learn from both successes and failures in conflict management.

Implementation Strategy: Conduct regular conflict climate assessments. Review conflict management policies and practices annually. Solicit employee feedback on conflict management effectiveness. Implement continuous improvement processes.

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