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Employee Cooperation and Destructive Workplace Conflict: A Qualitative Study of the Benefits of Cooperation in Kamuli District NGOs

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Abstract: Workplace conflict is an inevitable feature of organizational life, particularly in organizations where employees perform interdependent tasks and work under resource, time, and performance pressures. However, while disagreement can sometimes stimulate reflection and problem-solving, destructive workplace conflict can undermine employee relationships, teamwork, organizational effectiveness, and service delivery. Employee cooperation provides an alternative approach through which employees can manage differences constructively while pursuing shared organizational objectives. This study examined the importance of employee cooperation over destructive workplace conflict in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Kamuli District, Uganda. The study adopted a qualitative case-study design involving four NGOs in Kamuli District. Twenty participants were purposively selected, comprising managers, supervisors, field workers, social workers, and community members, with five participants drawn from each NGO. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. The findings showed that 16 of the 20 participants (80%) identified employee cooperation as an important solution to destructive workplace conflict, while four participants (20%) did not identify cooperation as the primary solution. The dominant themes emerging from the study were cooperation as a mechanism for conflict prevention, improved communication, mutual support and teamwork, joint problem-solving, improved employee relationships, and enhanced organizational effectiveness. The findings suggest that cooperation enables employees to approach disagreements as shared organizational problems rather than personal battles. The study concludes that NGOs can reduce destructive workplace conflict by deliberately developing cultures of cooperation, participatory communication, mutual respect, constructive feedback, and collaborative problem-solving. The study contributes to conflict-resolution scholarship by conceptualizing employee cooperation not merely as a desirable organizational behaviour but as a practical conflict-prevention mechanism within NGOs in a Ugandan district context. The study recommends that NGO leaders should invest in team-building initiatives, establish open communication channels, provide conflict management training, and create policies that encourage cooperation and constructive feedback.

Keywords: *Employee cooperation, workplace conflict, destructive conflict, NGOs, teamwork, conflict prevention, organizational effectiveness, Kamuli District, Uganda.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) constitute an important component of social and economic development in Uganda. They provide services and implement programmes in areas such as education, health, livelihoods, child protection, community development, governance, poverty reduction, and humanitarian assistance (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021). Their effectiveness depends considerably on the capacity of employees to work collectively toward shared objectives (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). The NGO sector in Uganda has grown significantly over the past three decades, with organizations operating at both national and district levels,

employing thousands of professionals across various disciplines (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Brass, 2012).

Employee cooperation is particularly important within NGOs because organizational tasks are highly interdependent (Biekart, 2014). Programme staff may depend on finance personnel for timely financial support, field workers may depend on supervisors for guidance, social workers may depend on programme managers for referrals and resources, while managers depend on employees to implement organizational programmes effectively (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). Community members, who are frequently beneficiaries and stakeholders, may also depend on NGO personnel for

information, services, and programme support (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Ebrahim, 2003).

Such interdependence creates opportunities for cooperation but also creates potential for workplace disagreements (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Employees may disagree about responsibilities, leadership decisions, workload, resources, communication, professional approaches, priorities, and methods of programme implementation (Rahim, 2011; Tjosvold, 2008). Disagreement itself is not necessarily destructive. Indeed, organizations may benefit when employees are able to express different views respectfully and use disagreement to improve decisions (Amason, 1996; Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

The problem emerges when disagreements become personal, hostile, persistent, or poorly managed (Deutsch, 1973; De Wit et al., 2012). Relationship conflict has been associated with poorer team performance and lower team-member satisfaction (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). A major meta-analysis by De Dreu and Weingart (2003) found strong negative relationships between relationship conflict and both team performance and member satisfaction. In contrast, cooperative approaches to workplace conflict have been associated with more effective conflict management and team performance (Alper et al., 2000; Tjosvold, 2008).

The importance of cooperation is also consistent with research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). Edmondson (1999) found that psychological safety within work teams was associated with learning behaviour and that learning behaviour mediated the relationship between psychological safety and team performance. Within Uganda, conflict within organizations has also received scholarly attention. Atuhwera's (2017) study of Action Aid Uganda examined organizational conflict and organizational performance and identified conflict as a relevant organizational concern.

Despite this body of literature, there is a need for more context-specific qualitative research examining how employees themselves understand cooperation as an alternative to destructive workplace conflict, particularly within NGOs operating at district level (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021). This study therefore examines employee cooperation versus destructive workplace conflict in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

NGOs depend heavily on employee cooperation to implement programmes and deliver services to communities (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014). However, the interdependent nature of NGO work can also generate workplace disagreements (Brass, 2012; Biebart, 2014). Employees may differ concerning workload, communication, leadership, responsibilities, resources, professional opinions, programme priorities, and interpersonal relationships (Rahim, 2011; Jehn, 1995).

When such disagreements are managed constructively, they can be discussed and resolved (Amason, 1996; Tjosvold, 2008). However, when disagreements become destructive, they may undermine trust, teamwork, communication, employee morale,

and organizational effectiveness (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012). The consequences may extend beyond employees to the communities served by NGOs (Ebrahim, 2003; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Delayed communication, poor coordination, interpersonal hostility, and reduced cooperation can interfere with programme implementation and service delivery (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013).

Existing research has demonstrated that relationship conflict can negatively affect team performance and satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). Research has also demonstrated the potential value of cooperative conflict-management approaches for team effectiveness (Alper et al., 2000; Tjosvold, 2008). Within Uganda, previous research has examined organizational conflict in NGOs, including ActionAid Uganda (Atuhwera, 2017). However, there remains a need to understand employee cooperation specifically as a strategy for reducing destructive workplace conflict within NGOs at district level (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021).

The problem addressed by this study is therefore the potential gap between the occurrence of workplace disagreements and the organizational capacity to manage them through cooperation. The study investigates whether and how cooperation can provide an alternative to destructive workplace conflict among NGOs in Kamuli District.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the importance of employee cooperation over destructive workplace conflict in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda.

1.4 Research Objective

The study was guided by the following objective:

To examine the benefits of employee cooperation in reducing destructive workplace conflict among NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda.

1.5 Study Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do employees and stakeholders understand employee cooperation within NGOs in Kamuli District?
2. What benefits does employee cooperation provide in the workplace?
3. How does cooperation contribute to the prevention of destructive workplace conflict?
4. What are the consequences of destructive workplace conflict for NGO employees and organizational effectiveness?
5. What strategies can NGOs adopt to strengthen employee cooperation?

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions. First, it contributes to the academic literature on workplace conflict and cooperation by providing empirical evidence from the NGO sector in Uganda. Second, it provides practical insights for NGO leaders,

managers, and human resource practitioners on how to strengthen employee cooperation and reduce destructive conflict. Third, it contributes to the growing body of research on organizational behaviour in African contexts. Fourth, the study provides evidence that can inform NGO policies and training programmes related to conflict management and employee relations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Employee Cooperation

Employee cooperation refers to the willingness of employees to work collectively toward shared goals (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). It involves mutual assistance, communication, trust, information sharing, respect, and joint responsibility (Alper et al., 2000; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). Cooperation should not be interpreted as the absence of disagreement. Employees can disagree while remaining cooperative (Deutsch, 1973). The critical issue is how disagreements are handled (Amason, 1996; Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

A cooperative employee may challenge a decision but remain committed to finding a solution (Tjosvold, 2008). A destructive employee may interpret disagreement as a personal attack and respond through blame, hostility, withdrawal, or retaliation (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn, 1995). This distinction is particularly important in organizations where employees depend on each other (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). Research has demonstrated that cooperative approaches to workplace conflict are associated with more effective conflict management and team performance (Alper et al., 2000; Tjosvold, 2008).

2.2 Destructive Workplace Conflict

Destructive workplace conflict occurs when disagreement produces consequences that damage interpersonal relationships and organizational functioning (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012). It may include:

1. Personal attacks and insults
2. Blame and accusations
3. Gossip and rumours
4. Intimidation and hostility
5. Refusal to communicate
6. Deliberate withholding of information
7. Formation of factions and cliques
8. Retaliation and revenge
9. Persistent interpersonal tension
10. Withdrawal from teamwork

De Dreu and Weingart's (2003) meta-analysis provides strong evidence that relationship conflict is negatively associated with team performance and member satisfaction. The implication for NGOs is significant. If employees become preoccupied with interpersonal disputes, organizational resources may be diverted from programme implementation to internal conflict management (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013).

2.3 Cooperation and Conflict Management

Cooperation is closely associated with collaborative conflict management (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). Alper et al. (2000) examined 61 self-managing teams involving 489 employees and found evidence that cooperative conflict management was associated with conflict-management efficacy and effective team performance. This supports the argument that employees who approach conflict cooperatively are more capable of resolving disagreements in ways that preserve team functioning (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 2008).

The present study extends this theoretical position by examining cooperation within NGOs in Kamuli District. Research by Kilmann and Thomas (1977) and Thomas and Kilmann (1976) on conflict-handling behaviour identifies different approaches to conflict, including competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. Their framework places particular attention on assertiveness and cooperativeness as dimensions of conflict behaviour.

2.4 Communication and Cooperation

Effective communication is one of the most important foundations of cooperation (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Employees who communicate openly are more likely to clarify expectations, identify misunderstandings, share information, seek assistance, provide feedback, explain concerns, and address problems before they escalate (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013). Poor communication, by contrast, creates space for assumptions and mistrust (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Milliken et al., 2003). For NGOs, communication is especially important because employees may work in offices, field locations, communities, and different programme departments (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014).

2.5 Cooperation and Teamwork

Teamwork requires employees to recognize that organizational objectives are shared (West & Farr, 1990; Anderson et al., 2014). Where cooperation exists, employees are more likely to assist colleagues, coordinate responsibilities, share information, and contribute to collective solutions (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). This is consistent with the findings of Alper et al. (2000), who demonstrated the connection between cooperative conflict management and team effectiveness. Research by Jehn and Mannix (2001) also found that teams with high levels of trust and cooperation were better able to manage conflict constructively.

2.6 Cooperation and Psychological Safety

Psychological safety provides another useful perspective (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety in terms of a shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking. Her study found that psychological safety was associated with team learning behaviour, which in turn was related to team performance (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012). In an NGO environment, employees who feel safe expressing concerns may be more likely to discuss disagreements openly rather than allowing resentment to develop (Schein, 2013; Morrison, 2011).

Cooperation and psychological safety may therefore reinforce each other (Edmondson, 2012; West & Farr, 1990).

2.7 Research Gap

Despite the growing body of literature on workplace conflict and cooperation, there remains limited empirical research examining these dynamics in the NGO sector in Uganda (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021). Most research has focused on private sector or government organizations in Western contexts (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; De Wit et al., 2012). There is therefore a need for context-specific qualitative research examining how employees themselves understand cooperation as an alternative to destructive workplace conflict (Brass, 2012; Biebart, 2014). This study addresses this gap by examining employee cooperation and destructive conflict in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Cooperative Conflict Management Theory

The study was guided primarily by Cooperative Conflict Management Theory, drawing on the work of Deutsch (1973) and subsequent research on cooperative and competitive approaches to conflict (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). The theory proposes that the nature of interdependence among individuals affects their approach to conflict (Deutsch, 1973). Where people perceive their goals as positively interdependent, cooperation becomes more likely (Tjosvold, 2008). Where they perceive their goals as negatively interdependent, competitive behaviour may become dominant (Deutsch, 1973).

This theory is appropriate for NGOs because employees frequently depend upon one another to achieve shared organizational objectives (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). For example, successful implementation of an NGO programme may require cooperation among:

1. Management and leadership
2. Supervisors and coordinators
3. Field workers and frontline staff
4. Social workers and community workers
5. Finance and administration personnel
6. Community stakeholders and beneficiaries

The theory therefore supports the proposition that cooperation can transform workplace disagreement from an interpersonal struggle into a joint problem-solving process (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). The theory also aligns with research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012), which suggests that employees who feel safe are more likely to engage in cooperative behaviours.

3.2 Theoretical Proposition

Based on the Cooperative Conflict Management Theory, the study proposes the following theoretical pathway:

Employee cooperation → Constructive communication → Joint problem-solving → Reduced destructive conflict →

Stronger teamwork → Improved organizational effectiveness

Conversely:

Poor cooperation → Communication breakdown → Mistrust → Destructive conflict → Weakened teamwork → Reduced organizational effectiveness

This proposition suggests that cooperation serves as a foundation for constructive workplace relationships and a mechanism for preventing destructive conflict (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). The study tests this proposition through qualitative examination of employee experiences in NGOs.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study conceptualized employee cooperation as the primary explanatory phenomenon influencing destructive workplace conflict and organizational outcomes. The conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

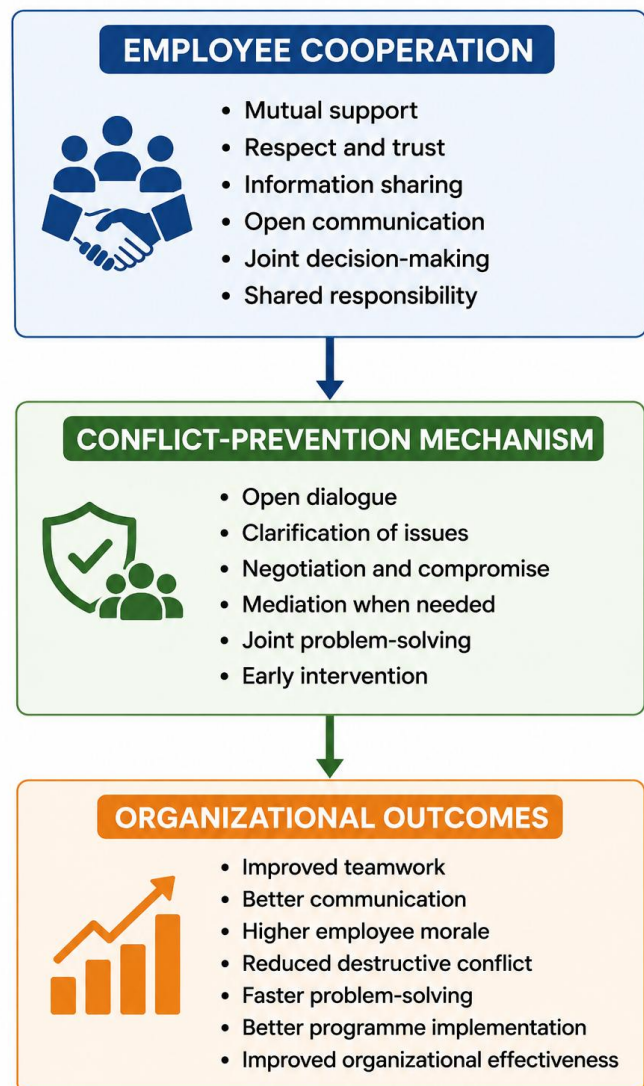


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Employee Cooperation and Destructive Workplace Conflict

The framework assumes that employee cooperation serves as a foundation for constructive workplace relationships (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). When cooperation is present, employees are more likely to engage in conflict-prevention behaviours such as open dialogue, clarification, negotiation, and joint problem-solving (Deutsch, 1973; Alper et al., 2000). These behaviours, in turn, produce positive organizational outcomes including improved teamwork, better communication, higher employee morale, reduced destructive conflict, and enhanced organizational effectiveness (Edmondson, 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). The framework guides the study's data collection and analysis by focusing attention on the relationships between cooperation, conflict prevention, and organizational outcomes.

5. METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative case-study design. The qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to understand participants' experiences, perceptions, interpretations, and explanations concerning employee cooperation and workplace conflict (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Qualitative methods enable researchers to explore complex social phenomena in depth, capturing participants' perspectives and meanings (Patton, 2015; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). A case-study design was selected because the research focused on NGOs operating within a specific geographical and organizational context: Kamuli District (Yin, 2014; Stake, 1995). The case-study approach enabled in-depth investigation of the phenomenon within its real-world context.

5.2 Study Area

The study was conducted in four NGOs operating in Kamuli District, Uganda. Kamuli District is located in the Eastern Region of Uganda, approximately 120 kilometres from Kampala, the capital city (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The district has a population of approximately 500,000 people, predominantly engaged in subsistence agriculture (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The NGOs provided an appropriate setting for investigating workplace cooperation because their activities involve employees occupying different roles and interacting with communities (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021).

5.3 Selection of NGOs

Four NGOs were purposively selected based on several criteria. First, selected NGOs had been operational in Kamuli District for at least three years, ensuring organizational stability. Second, selected NGOs had at least 10 employees, providing sufficient organizational complexity. 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.

5.4 Study Population and Participants

The study involved 20 participants, with five participants selected from each of the four NGOs. Participants represented different organizational and stakeholder positions, including:

- Managers (4 participants)
- Supervisors (4 participants)
- Field workers (4 participants)
- Social workers (4 participants)
- Community members (4 participants)

This diversity was intended to provide different perspectives concerning employee cooperation and workplace conflict (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). The inclusion of community members was important because they are beneficiaries and stakeholders who observe and experience the consequences of NGO employee relationships and organizational effectiveness (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Ebrahim, 2003).

Inclusion Criteria: Participants were included if they: (a) had been employed by or associated with the NGO for at least one year; (b) had direct experience with workplace relationships and conflict; and (c) provided voluntary informed consent to participate.

Exclusion Criteria: Participants were excluded if they: (a) had less than one year of association with the NGO; or (b) declined to provide informed consent.

5.5 Sampling Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with relevant knowledge and experience (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009). The use of participants from different organizational levels was important because workplace conflict may be experienced differently by managers, supervisors, field employees, social workers, and community stakeholders (Jehn, 1995; Rahim, 2011). The sampling process involved several steps. First, each NGO's leadership was contacted and the study was explained. Second, leadership identified potential participants who met the inclusion criteria. Third, the research team contacted potential participants individually, explained the study, and invited participation.

5.6 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the 20 participants concerning their experiences and perceptions of workplace cooperation and destructive conflict (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2015). Interviews followed an interview guide with open-ended questions focused on:

- Participants' understanding of cooperation
- Experiences of workplace disagreement
- Consequences of destructive conflict
- Benefits of cooperation
- Approaches to resolving workplace conflict
- Strategies for strengthening cooperation

Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Interviews were conducted in English and, where necessary, in the local language with translation support. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

5.7 Data Collection Period

Data collection was conducted over a period of two months, from July to August 2026.

5.8 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). The analysis involved:

- Familiarization with participant responses through repeated reading of transcripts
- Identification of significant statements related to cooperation and conflict
- Initial coding of relevant features in the data
- Grouping related codes into potential themes
- Development and refinement of themes
- Comparison of themes across participant categories (managers, supervisors, field workers, social workers, community members)
- Interpretation of findings in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework

Coding was conducted manually, with themes developed iteratively through discussion and review (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). The themes were checked against the dataset to ensure they accurately represented participant experiences and perceptions.

5.9 Trustworthiness and Credibility

Several strategies were employed to ensure trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Credibility was enhanced through triangulation of participant perspectives (different roles and levels), member checking (sharing preliminary findings with participants), and peer debriefing. Transferability was enhanced through thick description of the research context and participants. Dependability was enhanced through transparent documentation of the research process.

Confirmability was enhanced through reflexivity and maintaining an audit trail.

5.10 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical research protocols (Mertens, 2015; Israel & Hay, 2006). Ethical approval was obtained from the Kampala International University Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was ensured through anonymization of data using participant codes (Manager 1, Supervisor 2, etc.). Anonymity was guaranteed in all research outputs. Voluntary participation was emphasized, and participants were assured that their responses would not be shared with their employers.

6. FINDINGS

6.1 Participant Distribution

Table 1: Participant Distribution by Category

S/N	CATEGORY	NUMBER
1	Managers	4
2	Supervisors	4
3	Field workers	4
4	Social workers	4
5	Community members	4
Total number of participants		20

Source: Researcher—Mwogereze Richard, 2026

Each NGO contributed five participants. The distribution provided perspectives from organizational leadership, supervisory personnel, frontline employees, social-service personnel, and community stakeholders.

6.2 Overall Perception of Cooperation

The most significant finding was that 16 out of 20 participants (80%) identified cooperation as a solution to destructive workplace conflict, as indicated in the table below.

Table 2: Participant Perception of Cooperation as a Solution

S/N	RESPONSE	PARTICIPANTS	PERCENTAGE
1	Cooperation identified as a solution	16	80%
2	Cooperation not identified as primary solution	4	20%
Total		20	100%

Source: Researcher—Mwogereze Richard, 2026

The 80% finding demonstrates a strong qualitative pattern across the participant group. However, because the study was

qualitative and the sample was purposively selected, the 80% should be interpreted as a descriptive indication of the

participants' views, rather than as a statistically generalizable estimate of all NGO employees in Kamuli District (Patton, 2015; Merriam, 2009).

6.3 Thematic Findings

Theme 1: Cooperation as a Solution to Destructive Workplace Conflicts

The dominant theme emerging from the study was the perception that cooperation provides an important solution to destructive workplace conflict. Sixteen participants, representing 80% of the sample, identified cooperation as a way of addressing destructive conflict. The dominant interpretation was that conflict becomes less destructive when employees remain willing to communicate and work together.

Participant Quotations:

Manager 1: "In my experience, when employees are willing to cooperate, even serious disagreements can be resolved. The problem is when people stop talking to each other or start blaming each other. That's when conflicts become destructive and affect the whole organization."

Supervisor 2: "Cooperation is the foundation of everything we do. When we have disagreements, we can solve them if we're willing to work together. When cooperation breaks down, even small disagreements become big problems."

Field Worker 3: "I've seen conflicts that were resolved quickly because people were willing to listen and cooperate. I've also seen conflicts that destroyed teams because people refused to cooperate. The difference is cooperation."

Social Worker 1: "Cooperation means we're on the same side. Even when we disagree about how to do something, we remember that we share the same goals. That keeps conflicts from becoming personal."

Community Member 2: "As a community member, I can see when NGO staff are cooperating and when they're not. When they cooperate, services are delivered better. When there's conflict, the community suffers."

Analysis: These quotations reveal that participants consistently viewed cooperation as a mechanism for preventing destructive conflict and maintaining organizational effectiveness. The emphasis on "willingness to cooperate" suggests that cooperation is not merely a passive state but an active choice that employees make (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011).

Theme 2: Cooperation Promotes Open Communication

Participants emphasized the relationship between cooperation and communication. Cooperative employees are more likely to discuss problems openly instead of allowing disagreements to develop through assumptions and misinformation.

Participant Quotations:

Manager 2: "Communication is the lifeblood of any organization. When employees cooperate, they communicate openly. They share information, raise concerns, and ask questions. This prevents misunderstandings that can lead to conflict."

Supervisor 3: "I've noticed that in teams where people cooperate, communication is better. People feel comfortable speaking up. They don't hide problems. They address issues before they become big conflicts."

Field Worker 4: "When there's cooperation, communication flows freely. People share what they're doing, what they're struggling with, what they need. This prevents the misunderstandings and assumptions that cause conflict."

Social Worker 2: "Poor communication is often the root cause of workplace conflict. Cooperation enables communication. When people cooperate, they talk to each other. This prevents problems from developing."

Community Member 3: "I can tell when there's good communication among NGO staff. They're transparent with us. They explain things. They listen to our concerns. This builds trust and prevents conflicts with the community."

Analysis: The finding indicates that communication serves as a bridge between disagreement and resolution (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). Where communication is absent, employees may interpret colleagues' behaviour negatively. Where communication is present, employees can explain their perspectives and seek clarification (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013). Thus, cooperation can prevent destructive conflict by creating opportunities for dialogue.

Theme 3: Cooperation Encourages Mutual Support

The findings also indicate that cooperation involves employees supporting one another in their work. Mutual support is particularly important within NGOs because employees frequently operate under demanding programme conditions.

Participant Quotations:

Manager 3: "Mutual support is at the heart of cooperation. When employees support each other, they share the load. They help when someone is overwhelmed. They step in when someone is struggling. This prevents the resentment that can lead to conflict."

Supervisor 4: "I encourage my team to support each other. When one person is struggling, others help. This creates a sense of shared responsibility and prevents the frustration that can lead to conflict."

Field Worker 1: "In the field, we face many challenges. When we support each other, we overcome them together. When we don't, small problems become big conflicts. Mutual support is essential."

Social Worker 3: "Social work is demanding. When colleagues support each other, it makes a huge difference. We share resources, advice, and encouragement. This prevents burnout and reduces conflict."

Community Member 4: "I've seen NGO staff support each other when projects are challenging. This makes them more effective. When they don't support each other, projects suffer and the community loses."

Analysis: The finding suggests that mutual support is particularly important within NGOs because employees frequently operate under demanding programme conditions (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). When employees support colleagues who experience difficulties, problems can be resolved before they develop into interpersonal disputes (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011). The finding also suggests that cooperation reduces the tendency to interpret workplace problems as individual failures (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012).

Theme 4: Cooperation Encourages Teamwork

The study found that cooperation strengthens teamwork by encouraging employees to recognize shared organizational goals. Rather than working in isolation, cooperative employees coordinate responsibilities and share information.

Participant Quotations:

Manager 4: "Cooperation transforms a group of individuals into a team. When employees cooperate, they work together toward shared goals. They coordinate their efforts. They share information. This makes the team more effective."

Supervisor 1: "I've seen how cooperation improves teamwork. When people cooperate, they help each other. They share what they know. They work together to solve problems. This reduces conflict and improves outcomes."

Field Worker 2: "In the field, teamwork is essential. When we cooperate, we coordinate our activities. We support each other. We share information. This prevents the confusion and frustration that can lead to conflict."

Social Worker 4: "Social work requires teamwork. We work with multiple stakeholders and complex cases. Cooperation enables us to work together effectively. Without cooperation, we'd be working against each other."

Community Member 1: "The best NGO teams are those that work together. When staff cooperate, they deliver better services. When there's conflict, services suffer. Cooperation is essential for teamwork."

Analysis: This finding corresponds with Alper et al. (2000), whose research linked cooperative conflict management with conflict-management efficacy and effective team performance. The present study therefore suggests that teamwork should be viewed as both an organizational-performance mechanism and a conflict-prevention mechanism (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; De Wit et al., 2012).

Theme 5: Cooperation Encourages Joint Problem-Solving

Another important finding was the role of cooperation in solving organizational problems. The cooperative approach changes the question from "Who is responsible for the problem?" to "How can we solve the problem together?"

Participant Quotations:

Supervisor 2: "In cooperative teams, problems are solved together. When there's a challenge, we ask 'How can we fix this together?' rather than 'Who caused this problem?' This makes a huge difference in reducing blame and conflict."

Field Worker 3: "When we cooperate, we solve problems together. Instead of pointing fingers, we focus on finding solutions. This reduces blame and prevents the defensiveness that fuels destructive conflict."

Social Worker 1: "Problem-solving is more effective when people cooperate. We share ideas, perspectives, and resources. We work together to find solutions. This not only solves problems but also strengthens relationships."

Manager 2: "I encourage my team to approach problems cooperatively. Instead of blaming each other, we work together to find solutions. This has dramatically reduced conflict in our team."

Community Member 2: "When NGO staff solve problems together, they're more effective. They find better solutions. They avoid the blame and conflict that can undermine their work."

Analysis: This distinction is important because blame can make employees defensive, whereas joint problem-solving encourages them to contribute ideas (Deutsch, 1973; Rahim, 2011). Cooperation can therefore transform disagreement into an opportunity for organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999; Argyris & Schön, 1996).

Theme 6: Cooperation Improves Employee Relationships

Participants emphasized that cooperation strengthens interpersonal relationships among employees, creating a foundation for constructive workplace interactions.

Participant Quotations:

Supervisor 3: "Cooperation builds relationships. When people cooperate, they develop trust and respect. This creates a positive work environment where conflict is less likely to develop."

Field Worker 4: "Good relationships are essential in the workplace. When employees cooperate, they build relationships. They get to know each other. They develop trust. This prevents the misunderstandings that lead to conflict."

Manager 3: "Relationships are the foundation of effective teamwork. When employees have good relationships, they communicate better and resolve disagreements more constructively."

Social Worker 2: "As social workers, we work closely with colleagues. When relationships are good, we work well together. When relationships are poor, conflict develops. Cooperation is essential for building good relationships."

Community Member 3: "I can see the relationships among NGO staff. When they have good relationships, they work well together. This benefits the community. When there's tension, the work suffers."

Analysis: This finding aligns with research on social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which suggests that positive relationships are built through reciprocal cooperation and trust (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006).

Theme 7: Cooperation Enhances Organizational Effectiveness

Finally, participants connected cooperation to broader organizational outcomes, including improved programme implementation and service delivery.

Participant Quotations:

Manager 4: "Cooperation improves organizational effectiveness. When employees cooperate, they work more efficiently, solve problems faster, and deliver better results. This ultimately benefits the communities we serve."

Supervisor 4: "Our organization is more effective when employees cooperate. We implement programmes better, serve communities more effectively, and achieve our goals more efficiently."

Field Worker 1: "When we cooperate, we get things done. Work is easier, faster, and more effective. This benefits everyone."

Social Worker 4: "Organizational effectiveness depends on cooperation. When people work together, we achieve more. When there's conflict, we achieve less."

Community Member 4: "The NGOs that are most effective in our community are those where staff cooperate. They deliver better services and have a greater impact."

Analysis: This finding is consistent with research by Alper et al. (2000) and Tjosvold (2008), who found that cooperative conflict management is associated with improved team and organizational performance. The study suggests that cooperation is not merely a desirable workplace behaviour but a key driver of organizational effectiveness.

7. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong qualitative evidence that employee cooperation is perceived as an important solution to destructive workplace conflict in NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda. The 80% of participants who identified cooperation as a solution represents a significant qualitative pattern that warrants discussion and interpretation.

7.1 Cooperation as a Conflict-Prevention Mechanism

The study's central finding—that cooperation is perceived as a solution to destructive conflict—aligns with the Cooperative Conflict Management Theory (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 2008). The theory proposes that cooperative approaches to conflict enable employees to address disagreements constructively rather than destructively (Rahim, 2011; Alper et al., 2000). The participants' responses confirm this theoretical proposition, demonstrating that cooperation serves as a conflict-prevention mechanism by creating conditions for constructive communication, mutual support, and joint problem-solving (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012).

The finding that cooperation encourages open communication is particularly significant. Previous research has established that communication breakdown is a primary cause of destructive conflict (Morrison, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003). The present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that cooperation enables communication, thereby preventing misunderstandings from escalating into destructive conflict (Edmondson, 1999; Schein, 2013). This suggests that cooperation should be viewed as both an end in itself and a means of enabling constructive workplace interactions (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011).

The study also found that cooperation encourages mutual support and teamwork. This finding aligns with research by Alper et al. (2000), who demonstrated that cooperative conflict management is associated with team effectiveness. The present study extends this finding by demonstrating that cooperation operates at the interpersonal level—through mutual support, trust, and respect—to prevent destructive conflict (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; De Wit et al., 2012). When employees support each other, they build relationships that enable them to address disagreements constructively (Lewicki et al., 2006; Mayer et al., 1995).

7.2 Joint Problem-Solving and Organizational Learning

The finding that cooperation encourages joint problem-solving is particularly important. The participants' emphasis on asking

"How can we solve this together?" rather than "Who is responsible for this problem?" reflects a shift from blame-oriented to solution-oriented approaches (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990). This distinction is crucial because blame-oriented approaches tend to generate defensiveness and escalate conflict, while solution-oriented approaches enable collaborative problem-solving and organizational learning (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012).

This finding is consistent with research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999), which suggests that employees who feel safe are more likely to engage in learning behaviours. In the present study, cooperation created conditions—mutual support, trust, open communication—that enabled employees to approach problems collaboratively (Schein, 2013; Morrison, 2011). This suggests that cooperation should be viewed not merely as a conflict-prevention mechanism but as a foundation for organizational learning and improvement (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990).

7.3 Cooperation and Employee Relationships

The study found that cooperation improves employee relationships by building trust, respect, and mutual understanding. This finding aligns with Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005), which proposes that positive relationships are built through reciprocal cooperation (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006). The participants' emphasis on relationships suggests that cooperation is not merely a transactional behaviour but a relational process that transforms workplace interactions (Tjosvold, 2008; Rahim, 2011).

Good employee relationships create a foundation for constructive conflict management (Jehn, 1995; De Dreu & Weingart, 2003). When employees trust and respect each other, they are more likely to express disagreement constructively and less likely to interpret disagreement as a personal attack (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011). This finding suggests that NGO leaders should invest in relationship-building activities that foster cooperation and trust among employees (Schein, 2013; Edmondson, 2012).

7.4 Organizational Effectiveness

Finally, the study connected cooperation to broader organizational outcomes. Participants emphasized that cooperation improves organizational effectiveness by enabling better programme implementation, more efficient service delivery, and greater impact on beneficiary communities (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). This finding is consistent with research by Alper et al. (2000) and Tjosvold (2008), who found that cooperative conflict management is associated with improved team and organizational performance.

The connection between cooperation and organizational effectiveness has important implications for NGOs (Ebrahim, 2003; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). When employees cooperate, they work more efficiently, coordinate more effectively, and deliver better services (Brass, 2012; Biebart, 2014). Conversely, when destructive conflict occurs, organizational resources are diverted to conflict management, programmes suffer, and

service delivery is compromised (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). This suggests that strengthening employee cooperation is not merely a human resource concern but a strategic priority for organizational effectiveness (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021).

7.5 Theoretical Implications

The study's findings have several theoretical implications. First, the findings support Cooperative Conflict Management Theory (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 2008) by demonstrating that cooperative approaches to conflict prevent destructive outcomes. The study provides empirical evidence from an African NGO context, extending the theory's applicability beyond Western organizational settings.

Second, the findings support Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) by demonstrating that cooperation builds positive relationships through reciprocal behaviours. The participants' emphasis on mutual support, trust, and respect reflects the relational processes central to social exchange theory (Mayer et al., 1995; Lewicki et al., 2006).

Third, the findings support research on psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson, 2012) by demonstrating that cooperation creates conditions—trust, respect, open communication—that enable employees to engage in constructive behaviours. The study suggests that cooperation and psychological safety reinforce each other, creating a virtuous cycle of constructive workplace interactions (Schein, 2013; Morrison, 2011).

7.6 Practical Implications

The study has several practical implications for NGOs and their leaders. First, the finding that cooperation prevents destructive conflict suggests that NGOs should invest in cooperation-building activities (Lewis, 2014; Fowler, 2013). This could include team-building initiatives, training in communication and conflict resolution, and creating organizational cultures that value cooperation and mutual support (Edmondson, 2012; Schein, 2013).

Second, the finding that cooperation encourages open communication suggests that NGOs should create communication structures that enable employees to share concerns and address problems openly (Morrison, 2011; Milliken et al., 2003). This could include regular team meetings, feedback mechanisms, and open-door policies (Edmondson, 1999; Morrison, 2011).

Third, the finding that cooperation enables joint problem-solving suggests that NGOs should develop collaborative problem-solving approaches (Argyris & Schön, 1996; Senge, 1990). This could include involving employees in decision-making, encouraging diverse perspectives, and creating learning cultures (Edmondson, 2012; West & Farr, 1990).

Fourth, the connection between cooperation and organizational effectiveness suggests that strengthening employee cooperation should be viewed as a strategic priority (Mutebi, 2020; Okello, 2021). NGOs should integrate cooperation-building into their strategic planning, human resource policies, and organizational development initiatives (Fowler, 2013; Lewis, 2014).

7.7 Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the qualitative design and purposive sampling limit the generalizability of the findings. The findings reflect the views of 20 participants from four NGOs in Kamuli District and may not be representative of all NGOs in Uganda.

Second, the reliance on self-reported data may have been influenced by social desirability bias. Participants may have provided responses they perceived as acceptable rather than their genuine experiences.

Third, the study focused on employee cooperation and destructive conflict but did not examine other factors that influence workplace conflict, such as organizational structure, leadership style, or external pressures.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design captured participants' experiences at a single point in time. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to examine how cooperation and conflict dynamics evolve over time.

7.8 Suggestions for Future Research

Several directions for future research are suggested. First, quantitative research testing the relationships between cooperation, conflict, and organizational outcomes would complement the qualitative findings. Surveys could measure cooperation, conflict types, and organizational outcomes to enable statistical analysis.

Second, comparative research examining cooperation and conflict across different organizational contexts—NGOs, private sector, government—would enable analysis of contextual influences. Third, research examining interventions to strengthen cooperation, such as training programmes or policy changes, would provide practical guidance for NGOs.

Fourth, research examining the role of leadership in fostering cooperation would provide insights into how leaders can create cooperative organizational cultures. Fifth, longitudinal research examining how cooperation and conflict dynamics evolve over time would provide insights into organizational change processes.

8. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that employee cooperation is perceived as an important solution to destructive workplace conflict among NGOs in Kamuli District, Uganda. The dominant themes emerging from the study—cooperation as a mechanism for conflict prevention, improved communication, mutual support, teamwork, joint problem-solving, improved employee relationships, and enhanced organizational effectiveness—demonstrate that cooperation operates through multiple pathways to prevent destructive conflict and promote positive organizational outcomes.

The findings suggest that cooperation enables employees to approach disagreements as shared organizational problems rather than personal battles. When employees cooperate, they communicate openly, support each other, work as teams, and solve problems together. These behaviours prevent the

escalation of disagreement into destructive conflict and contribute to organizational learning and improvement.

The study contributes to conflict-resolution scholarship by conceptualizing employee cooperation not merely as a desirable organizational behaviour but as a practical conflict-prevention mechanism within NGOs in a Ugandan district context. The study demonstrates that cooperation is not simply the absence of conflict but an active process that creates conditions for constructive workplace interactions.

Ultimately, the study concludes that NGOs can reduce destructive workplace conflict by deliberately developing cultures of cooperation, participatory communication, mutual respect, constructive feedback, and collaborative problem-solving. This requires intentional efforts by NGO leaders to build cooperation into organizational structures, processes, and cultures.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and discussion of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

9.1 Promote Cooperation-Building Activities

NGO leaders should invest in activities that build cooperation among employees. This could include team-building exercises, retreats, and social events that enable employees to develop relationships, trust, and mutual understanding. Such activities create a foundation for cooperation that can prevent destructive conflict.

Implementation Strategy: Schedule regular team-building activities. Include cooperation-building in annual planning. Budget for team development activities. Encourage informal social interactions among employees.

9.2 Establish Open Communication Channels

Organizations should create structures and processes that enable open communication. This could include regular team meetings, feedback mechanisms, suggestion boxes, and open-door policies. Employees should feel comfortable raising concerns and providing feedback without fear of retaliation.

Implementation Strategy: Implement regular team meetings. Establish anonymous feedback mechanisms. Train managers in active listening. Create safe spaces for employee voice.

9.3 Provide Conflict Resolution Training

NGOs should provide training in conflict resolution, communication, and cooperation. Employees should learn skills for addressing disagreements constructively, providing feedback effectively, and working collaboratively. Managers should receive training in mediating conflict and fostering cooperation.

Implementation Strategy: Develop a conflict resolution training programme. Include communication and cooperation skills in orientation. Provide refresher training annually. Train managers in mediation and conflict facilitation.

9.4 Develop Cooperative Organizational Cultures

NGO leaders should create organizational cultures that value cooperation, mutual support, and constructive feedback. This requires leadership commitment, clear communication of values, and policies that reward cooperative behaviours and discourage destructive conflict.

Implementation Strategy: Articulate cooperation as a core organizational value. Recognize and reward cooperative behaviours. Address destructive conflict promptly and constructively. Lead by example.

9.5 Involve Employees in Decision-Making

Organizations should involve employees in decision-making processes, particularly decisions that affect their work. Participatory decision-making builds commitment, trust, and cooperation while creating opportunities for constructive dialogue.

Implementation Strategy: Establish participatory decision-making processes. Involve employees in strategic planning. Create committees and working groups. Solicit employee input on policies and programmes.

9.6 Establish Conflict Resolution Mechanisms

NGOs should develop formal mechanisms for addressing workplace conflict constructively. This could include grievance procedures, mediation processes, and conflict resolution protocols. Employees should be aware of these mechanisms and confident that they will be applied fairly.

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

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