

THERE IS GOOD NEWS FOR INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Muriel Asseraf

ABSTRACT

The advocacy work carried out by human rights organizations, mainly in Latin America, was and is constantly being challenged by an external context of global crisis related to the Covid pandemic and its impacts that still affect us, but also and very importantly, by internal situations related to organizational structure, capacity and health. In this brief institutional reflection from Conectas, we share the challenges, the lessons learned and, most importantly, the concrete actions that have been implemented in recent years within the organization to strengthen it institutionally and ensure the safety and well-being of the people who are part of the team. To this end, it was and still is necessary to assume the mistakes along the way, recognize the priority of care and health of the team and finally evaluate the implications of this process in relations with both partners and funders.

KEYWORDS

Organisational culture | Care | Well-being | Working models

Had this article been written a few years ago, it might have painted a grimmer picture. Events and trends in the NGO world in particular, and in the world in general, have precipitated some changes in the way NGOs – and their funders – consider institutional development issues. For the better!

What I hope to share in this essay are not research-based data and findings. Rather, they are some thoughts and observations based on my experience as an institutional development consultant for various NGOs in São Paulo, Brazil, and more specifically as an institutional development coordinator (from 2012 to 2015) and officer (since 2020) for Conectas Human Rights, a human rights organization based in São Paulo.

Over the past few years, I have witnessed a subtle, yet profound, change in the way organizations look at and deal with institutional development issues, especially those related to people management and organizational climate. Profound because I believe (I hope) that the changes described in this paper are irreversible and will continue to be felt in the long run. Subtle because they may appear small in the eyes of outsiders, but they are, in fact, shaking the very power structures (internal and external) that have for so long prevailed in the NGO world. I believe (and hope) that these changes are ushering in a new way of looking at people management, career development, work models and organizational culture. These models are based on the organization's values and the collective and individual profiles of its members, rather than on existing models inspired, more often than not, from the corporate world.

At Conectas, this change was driven and shaped by a strong desire from the leadership of the organization - especially its Executive Director Juana Kweitel, Associate Directors Camila Asano and Marcos Fuchs, but also from its coordination team – to be a better organization, to do things differently. They realized that people come first, that care and well-being are paramount, and they acted on it.

I do not, by any means, wish to suggest that we have reached the end of the journey. That we have found a solution to all management and organizational culture problems in the non-profit sector. If anything, we may have just found our way to the beginning of the road. We are uncovering issues that are important and relevant to our work and to our sustainability: we have learned that our institutions are impregnated by the structural racism we try to combat; we have been forced to admit that some of our colleagues are also overworked and underpaid; we have had to face the fact that the values that we stand for are not always what guide our internal processes. And as painful as it may be, identifying the problem is a first step towards solving it.

I will not do a social and historical analysis of the elements that have paved the way for this transformation. Others will do it better and more accurately. As ably outlined in an article in *The Intercept*,¹ questions of abuse, inequalities among staff members, lack of transparency in wage policies, internal conflict, burn out, cancel culture, race and gender discrimination are issues that have plagued advocacy organizations for years and that

possibly have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. These issues are now being discussed and tackled by most organizations.

Indeed, for the longest time, as would or should be expected, NGOs focused their attention and resources on the impact they can have in the world: their impact on people's lives; their ability to affect change; their power to educate, influence and mobilize. And often, though not always, it seemed like focusing on internal matters – staff well-being, development, remuneration and career plans and institutional policies and processes – was a distraction from the organization's core mission, a waste of precious time and scarce resources.

For a long time as well, the form of funding – project-based, short-term, with a strong emphasis on “final beneficiaries” – encouraged this kind of thinking: anything that did not directly impact target populations or final objectives was difficult to include in a budget.

But things started to change, slowly and surely. Some of these changes were provoked by the brutal recognition that our institutions are not immune to the very ills we are trying to fight. At Conectas, we received a few racism complaints and entered a deep process of uncovering our unconscious biases. Committed to greater racial diversity at all levels in the organization, we reformed our selection processes and looked at our career development opportunities, among others. All institutional aspects of the organization are now engaged in the fight against racism.²

Over the past few years, in a context of great political adversity, we also had to recognize that some of our team members suffered from depression and anxiety and that maybe their identity as NGO workers and human rights activists had something to do with it.

As an institutional development professional, I often feel like I am lacking a roadmap to some of the problems I am presented with: how can small or medium-size organizations like Conectas create space for all team members to grow and develop their careers? What are the right mechanisms or processes that can help prevent acts of racism or discrimination? What is the right platform that can enable denunciations and swift resolution? How do organizations ensure the security of their teams without being constrained in our work? And the list goes on.

One of the main realizations of the past few years is that organizations have nothing if they do not have a committed group of people invested and dedicated to their mission. So, *the physical and mental well-being of staff is of absolute, critical importance for an organization like Conectas*. Human rights organizations are filled with professionals who believe that a better, more just society is possible. They also happen to be highly qualified and competent people, who are aware of the challenges and obstacles that they face. In Brazil, between an anti-democratic government and the Covid pandemic, the past few years have been particularly challenging. As an institution, recognizing that we work in complex and stressful environments on issues that can, at times, seem daunting, showing that you care

about collective but also about individual well-being and striving to create a culture in which we can share our doubts and concerns or celebrate our victories seemed important.

At Conectas, we elected the “culture of care” as a new institutional principle in 2021.³ Behind this choice was a deliberate decision made by all of us, to put it simply, to treat each other kindly in the context of a global pandemic that brought angst and sadness to all in particular ways. From then on, we had to treat each other with kindness in the midst of a distressing and sad context of a pandemic that each of us experienced differently.

- **Curate our work environment and culture:** like everywhere else, the Covid pandemic deeply impacted the way we work. We now spend quite a lot of time thinking about how to work better together, how to be more efficient, more constructive, but also, how to respect everyone’s constraints and space better. For example, at Conectas, we banned the use of WhatsApp and started using Slack as our virtual office to centralize work demands in one space. We made every first Friday of every month a day off. We established a working group to figure out the best hybrid work model for the organization, one that would preserve the positive aspects of working from home, while integrating time at the office.
- **Open channels of communication and dialogue:** we also established moments and spaces - working groups, team or general meetings, one-on-one conversations, online surveys - with specific dynamics, sometimes with the help of external consultants, which were meant to help us share our thoughts or our concerns, communicate better, be more transparent and ultimately bring us closer together.

Opening these channels of communication to better understand what are the most pressing issues on the organization’s mind does not mean that we knew then, or that we know now, how to respond to them. Indeed, as I mentioned before, the power structures, racism or discrimination issues that exist in the outside world do exist in our organizations. We recognize they exist and are committed to fighting them, but we also know that changing these structural problems will take time.

- **Policies matter!** We formalized some of the beliefs that bring us together. We developed a code of conduct that outlines how we collectively and individually should deal with ethical issues, especially racism. We also developed a safeguarding policy to help us better express how we ought to behave with people in situations of vulnerability. Naturally, for these documents to become alive, they need to be constantly updated and referred to and become an integral part of our daily work, something that is not always easily done considering the competing priorities.
- **The security of our team members is essential and by security we do mean processes, policies and rules.** Over the past couple of years, and thanks to the critical help of some of our funders, we have undergone a comprehensive risk assessment

process, bolstered our security policies and held various training sessions on different aspects of security management. Security is now an issue we discuss routinely, in staff meetings, before certain trips or missions, and with partners and funders.

- **A commitment to our work model:** At Conectas, we have created a working group to help come up with a new, hybrid working model. We have conducted surveys to ask people about their preferences and tried to maintain the positive aspects of the remote work imposed by the pandemic and include them in the current organization. We have changed the model a number of times already, based on the health context, and we are committed to evaluating and adapting it as many times as the group will deem necessary.
- **Bringing the Board closer to the team:** as the ultimate governance body, the board is often called on when important ethical or strategic issues arise or to ensure smooth leadership transitions. As such, it is important that most board members have an accurate and real-life understanding of the organization, something that is hard to convey through formal meetings. Mechanisms can and should be created to make sure that the board has opportunities to interact with staff beyond the leadership of the organization.
- **What do funders have to do with it?** The ability to use funding in a more flexible way is important for these types of efforts to be possible. At Conectas, over time, we have been able to shift from mostly project-based funding to a decent balance between institutional funding and project funding. In this regard, the Covid pandemic has accelerated the process, as a lot of our funders have given us greater flexibility to spend our funds during that time. We have also seen growing interest from some of our funders on well-being issues. For example, Laudes Foundation supported a holistic and comprehensive process to improve our security protocols and Luminate Foundation invited us to participate in their Potencia program. We have been invited to take part in group discussions and training sessions aimed at bringing together NGOs of a similar size and scope to discuss people's well-being, management, resilience and mental health issues in our context.
- **Sharing is part of the learning process:** Conectas, as its name indicates, believes deeply in the critical importance of partnership. For this reason, we also make a deliberate effort to share our experience with partner organizations and learn from them, to systematize our learnings so that they can be used as “public goods” by others in the field. This essay is one such effort. It is also our hope that the experience of organizations from the Global South like Conectas can be taken into consideration and help forge new institutional development practices in the NGO world.

For more sustainable work environments

The institutional development area should contribute to a meaningful and stimulating work environment. At times, some of the steps described above do require a specific investment,

but sometimes, change is possible with mere time and goodwill. A Google form will do the trick if you are hoping to understand how the team is doing. Creating transversal working groups can help bring people together on issues relevant to the entire organization and not only to their specific area or programme.

Over the course of the past few years, I have heard from many of my colleagues words of gratitude for Conectas' efforts to demonstrate "attention, care, and openness with the team," for "creating space for real, open-hearted exchanges," for "always paying attention to people's well-being." We know we still have a long way to go, but these words comfort us in knowing we are in the right direction.

It is my hope that organizations like Conectas can help pave the way for improved institutional development practices. As we navigate increasingly adverse and rapidly changing contexts, I trust that we will be able, collectively and individually, to uphold what we hold most dear: the belief that a better world is possible, the ability to change, adapt, and learn from our mistakes; the capacity to listen to each other even and mostly when we disagree and the ability to build work environments that are a reflection of our ideals.

Regardless of the size or scope of the organization, I truly believe that tackling these issues internally and externally – with partner organizations and with funders – is an ethical imperative. We know these are not easy conversations, and they require time and dedication at the very least. But not having these conversations is even riskier. Building a better world starts at home, and we owe it to ourselves and to the institutions we are building and we believe in to improve our institutional practices and pave the way for better, healthier and more sustainable work environments.

NOTES

1 • Ryan Grim, "Elephant in the Zoom." The Intercept, June 13, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://theintercept.com/2022/06/13/progressive-organizing-infighting-callout-culture/>.

2 • Maryuri Mora Grisales, "Sur 28: a dívida do movimento de direitos humanos no combate ao racismo: A edição que continua mudando estruturalmente a Sur." Revista Periferias 6, April 2021, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://revistaperiferias.org/materia/sur-28-a-divida-do-movimento-de-direitos-humanos-com-o-combate-ao-racismo/>.

3 • Ana María Hernández Cárdenas and Nallely Guadalupe Tello Méndez, "Self-care as a political strategy: Sustainability and well-being for women human rights defenders," *Sur Journal* 26 (December 2017), accessed December 31, 2022, <https://sur.conectas.org/en/self-care-as-a-political-strategy/>. This article became an important reference, sparked internal debates and made it possible to coordinate with external contacts, marking the beginning of an institutional learning process that put care and self-care in a central place in the organization.



MURIEL ASSERAF – *France/Brazil*

Muriel Asseraf is an Institutional Development Consultant at Conectas Human Rights. As such, together with the board of directors and the coordination, she is responsible for the organization's people management, and implements initiatives of care, integration, professional development, and well-being. Muriel is a Fielding University certified coach, and holds degrees in Journalism from New York University and International Relations from Columbia University. Muriel has over 15 years of experience in third sector organizations in Brazil and in the United States. She is French, and has been living in Brazil for 15 years.

Received in December 2022.
Original in English.



"This journal is published under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License"