

Developing CSOs as transforming agents

The phone rang, and I answered it, in that late afternoon approaching the end of the year. It was a call from Hope who was telling me about the news and her distress on the endless conflicts in the organisation. She felt exhausted and frustrated, and once more, it was a cry for help. After over a year of regular follow-up and several workshops on governance and organisational design had taken place, it was still difficult to implement the agreements we had slowly complied with to put into practice. Internal conflicts kept undermining any attempt to move forward.

We held some meetings to analyse the underlying patterns of institutional culture hindering any progress. It was an amazing experience! In fact, it was possible to raise traces of a collective perception of guilt and fear about making mistakes which were preventing any new initiative. Because the organisation had developed after the break-up of a group with an older organisation, people were still dealing with feelings of guilt and a huge fear of making mistakes - given the responsibility assumed. Therefore, there was so much conflict between people who had been around for a longer period and those who had just joined. Original guilt and fear of making mistakes hung in the air like insurmountable barriers. From that point onwards, it was possible to see, feel, and deal with conflicts differently, focusing on what mattered most - the purpose of the organisation.

This turn of events was possible because it is based on the conviction that civil society organisations are like living systems, endowed as they are with the capacity to develop, change, and regenerate themselves. But any change requires focus, care, energy, determination, and support in both dimensions – personal and organisational.

The knowledge and expertise of the ID Team on complexity and relevance of institutional development helped to implement a project of accompaniment, support, and development of seven CSOs in the metropolitan area of Recife, with the purpose of supporting their process of empowerment and sustainability since May 2020.

The ID Team and its work are a key component of the Oak Foundation Transition Fund in Brazil, covering the period from May 2020 to April 2024, to house and support organisations that no longer will be part of the Oak Foundation Brazil Program, because of the changes in the country policy in late 2019. The other component of the Transition Fund comprises the regranting, managed by the Socio-environmental Fund Casa (Fundo Socioambiental Casa).

Despite the limitations imposed by the pandemic in 2020, in the first six months of the project, we could set up a team, outline the methodological approach, establish links with the organisations, carry out an institutional assessment (baseline) and start a supporting process. In 2021, each organisation formulated its institutional development plan, from which it was possible to make progress in listening, mentoring and conflict mediation processes, and in tangible products, such as institutional policies, work plans, governance systems and organisational charts, resource mobilisation strategies, finance and accounting management procedures and so on. In 2022, our challenge is to

associate, in a more comprehensive/integrated way, advancements in specific areas as communications, strategy, management and others, along with identify and address patterns of institutional culture hindering deeper transformations in how each organisation is and performs.

We accomplish all the above work using an approach based on awareness of the social complexity of organisational phenomena (Complexity theory); a systemic perspective (systemic thinking) is perceived and regarded, whereby all the dimensions of work as part of a larger institutional and social body, which makes it worthwhile; by an integral vision which connects changes at the individual level with changes at the organisational level and in a wider social sphere; and a sensitive look to perceive, value and thematise subjective/cultural dimensions of organisational and social dynamics. It all happens through a reflective practice guided by the critical and powerful questioning (inspired by Paulo Freire theory).

To meet these challenges, the ID Team has seven professionals. According to an integral and systemic approach, specialists on various themes form the team along with others specialised in institutional development - most of them are based in the city of Recife.

The ID Team understands that strengthening CSOs institutionally means creating forms of support associated with reflective and learning spaces, regularly; so each organisation can define the direction and pace of change following its own choices and circumstances.

The ID Team's leader is Domingos Armani who is also a mentor in institutional development and a consultant in governance and organisational designs for projects. The other members of the team comprise: Leandro Valarelli - consultant for planning, strategy and monitoring and evaluation; Nataly Queiroz - communications consultant; Célio Meira - consultant in resource mobilisation; Havanna Marques - consultant in accounting and finance management; Cristiane Félix - a leadership mentor; Lindalva (Dalvinha) Correa - consultant for listening, dialogue & conflict mediation; and Ana Bárbara Caporal – assistant for administrative and financial management of projects.

For the ID Team, supporting institutional development of a CSO means favouring and supporting process, attitude, and capacity of the organisation to analyse and think itself in an integral and systemic way in its own context, but also to identify and propose solutions to strategic challenges – a requirement for greater prominence with sustainability.

In 2022, the ID Team will start systematising the experience of supporting the development of seven organisations of the Transition Fund, with the production of individual and collective knowledge that, in due course, will also involve the organisations themselves.

* For further information access: www.domingosarmani.com/oak