Success Patterns of ICSO Executives

Preliminary Findings from a Research Project Conducted by **The International Civil Society Centre** and **Conner Advisory**

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Being the chief executive of an international civil society organization (ICSO) has rarely been easy. One is under constant pressure to deliver critical humanitarian or development aid, often with insufficient resources. Now executive officers are faced with a set of even more significant challenges—draconian cuts in state-sponsored funding, political and military barriers to providing aid to many in need, attacks on core values of the sector, and a host of concurrent crises putting millions at risk of death or suffering. It is no wonder that, according to many observers, we are witnessing higher levels of turnover among chief executives in the sector.

However, the findings in this report reveal that while the environment within which ICSOs operate has never been more daunting, it is not the primary reason for this churn at the highest level of leadership. Rather, a combination of organizational challenges and crises appears to be the main driver of attrition of chief executives. The research also points to a set of success patterns that have allowed some executive leaders to navigate and even thrive despite the internal and external demands with which they must contend.

PURPOSE OF THE METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH

We initiated this research project with the intent of identifying the factors contributing to what we perceived as a high level of turnover among executive leaders of ICSOs over the past five years. We were curious if this turnover at the highest level of an organization affected the leaders' assessment of success. Finally, we were interested in discovering the patterns of executive leaders that enhance a leader's effectiveness and tenure.

We conducted one-hour interviews with leaders who had recently left their executive roles as well as with leaders who were still in place. The interviews were conducted over a two-month period from

late 2024 to early 2025.[1] We investigated three broad areas that could affect turnover and impact: internal pressures coming from within the organization itself, external challenges coming from the environment within which the organization operates, and the mindsets and behaviors that the individual leader brings to their role. Our total sample size was small (20), so our findings must be considered preliminary.

Before we share the details of our findings, we would like to sincerely thank all our participant leaders who were generous with their time and candid in their responses to our questions. On average, these leaders have each committed over two decades of their professional lives to the civil society sector. Collectively, they represent a broad swath of missions—from humanitarian relief to development assistance, from economic development to social justice. As we listened to their perspectives, it became abundantly clear that the executive role has never been more demanding than in this era of poly-crises.[2]

FACTORS LEADING TO TURNOVERS

There is a widely held perception that the civil society sector has experienced a higher-than-normal level of turnover of senior leaders over the past few years.[3] Given that both authors of this research are former chief executives of international organizations who chose to leave their posts voluntarily, we appreciate that the decision to leave (or to be asked to leave) an executive role is never taken lightly and is rarely made for a single reason. In our experience, there are usually a number of factors that influence these kinds of decisions, whether made by or for the individual leader. What we learned from the leaders in this study was consistent with our experience.

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[1] The interviews occurred after the U.S. presidential election but before the full extent and timing of the new administration's pause on foreign assistance was known. The leaders we spoke with could only speculate on the impact a change in policy would have for their organizations and the sector.

[2] See International Civil Society Centre's blog post "Never Waste a Good Crisis."

[3] Hudson, Oliver, and Mwikali Muthiani. *Understanding the Pathology of Large INGOs.* n.d. https://www.millenialhr.com/_files/ugd/896bfe_6e5691981bb94b969077dbf091540d70.pdf.

The leaders who were no longer in their executive roles had an average of over two decades of experience in the sector prior to their appointments. All but two were external hires. The group represented a mix of organizational structures, i.e., unitary organizations, federations, and movements. These leaders also represented a variety of humanitarian, development, and social justice organizations. Two of these leaders were originally from the Global Majority World.[4]

While each leader had a unique story about the circumstances surrounding their departure, their stories fell into one of three broad categories:

- **"It was time":** Several leaders in our sample felt that they had accomplished most if not all of what they had set out to achieve during their tenure. They believed strongly that it was time for a new leader—one who had the needed energy, expertise, and/or leadership approach to move their organizations into the next phases of their evolution. (Interestingly, some executives who were still in their roles expressed similar thoughts; that is, they anticipated a time when their greatest impact will have been made and a new kind of leadership will be required.)

- **"I was exhausted and frustrated":** Other leaders felt that a lack of support from their board and/or other leaders in their networks made an already demanding job even more challenging. Some described toxic politics or power dynamics among powerful interests (often the largest donor entities in their networks) undermining the executive's influence, effectiveness, and credibility. These factors often left the leaders feeling depleted and demoralized. In some cases, they reported symptoms of burnout and other health-related issues.

- **"I had no choice":** In two cases, executives were asked (or "encouraged") to leave by their boards. In one case, the board had lost confidence in the leader's ability to adequately

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[4] We are using the term "Global Majority World" in lieu of the traditional label "Global South."

address the threats confronting the organization. In the other case, an irreconcilable disagreement between the CEO and the board emerged over strategy and priorities.

While external challenges put significant stress on all of these leaders and their organizations, it was interesting that none of the executives attributed their departure to external circumstances or crises. Time and again, they highlighted *internal challenges* that motivated their decisions or the board's actions.

The most frequently mentioned internal challenges that contributed to the executives' decisions to leave included:

- Working within cumbersome governance structures and processes

- Establishing and maintaining productive relationships with boards and board chairs

- Trying to meet unclear, changing, and sometimes contradictory expectations of their roles by key stakeholders

- Managing disruptive and powerful players in their networks

- Working with management teams that were not willing or capable of leading at the level required by the circumstances

- Struggling with important ethical, organizational, and personal dilemmas in the performance of their role

Leaders from the Global Majority World mentioned that they also believed the structural racism they experienced in their organizations, and indeed across the sector, exacerbated the pressures that they had to contend with. While this issue was only mentioned by a handful of leaders in our sample, other research and anecdotal evidence suggest that this is an issue that continues to plague the sector despite efforts to address it. We believe that this challenge demands further investigation and action.

Finally, it should be noted that none of these leaders mentioned their personal approach to leadership (or possible "mismatch" between who they were as leaders and what the circumstances required) as a contributing factor in their departures. We will explore later in this report the interplay between what an organization requires from its leader and what a leader brings in terms of experience, expertise, and predisposition.

Impact of Executive Searches

One factor worth investigating further is the impact of executive headhunters. As has been documented in other studies,[5] there appears to be a paucity of qualified executive leaders across the sector. This results in executives frequently being pursued to join other ICSOs. Of course, headhunters are presumably recruiting from both groups of leaders in our sample. However, it seems reasonable to assume that a leader who is feeling ineffective, burned out, or frustrated in their role is likely to be more open to making a change.

INSIGHTS FROM COMPARING THE TWO GROUPS OF LEADERS

In the hope of identifying success patterns, we enlisted ICSO leaders who were still in place at the time of this research to participate in our study. As a group, they had a similar profile as leaders who had recently left their executive roles in that they represented a diverse group of organizational structures and missions. Three of the ten were promoted from within their organizations, while the others were external hires. Most had extensive prior experience (20 years on average) in the sector. Three executives in this group were from the Global Majority.

When we compared the leaders who were still in place with those who had recently left, we noticed several important similarities and differences, which are listed below. We will expand on each of these in the pages to follow.

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[5] Aaronson, Mike, and Andrew Thompson. *Who Do You Think You Are? The Past, Present, and Future of International NGOs*. Oxford: Nuffield College, University of Oxford, 2022.

Similarities in patterns—Leaders in both groups:

1. Tended to define their success in terms of internal issues they had addressed

2. Rated their level of success as chief executives very similarly

3. Reported a strikingly similar set of internal and external pressures with which they had to contend

Differences in patterns—In contrast to the executives who were no longer in their positions, the leaders still in place exhibited these profiles:

1. Most employed a set of strategies to effectively manage and/or leverage these internal and external challenges, namely:

    a. Securing board alignment

    b. Building strong management teams

    c. Leveraging their personal leadership strengths and experiences to effectively manage dilemmas

    d. Building strong foundations of personal resilience

2. A greater proportion possessed a background in the private sector

3. A greater proportion were leading faith-based institutions

Finally, the individuals who had recently left their leadership roles had a much shorter average tenure than the leaders still in place (3.8 years versus 11.4 years). This is likely the result of an unintentional sampling bias based on which individuals we contacted and who agreed to participate. A survey of a larger population of leaders could mitigate this bias. However, tenure difference was significant and

interesting enough that it influenced some of our analysis. Moving forward, we will refer to shorter-tenured (ST) versus longer-tenured (LT) leaders in this report where a difference in the length of time in the executive role was worth noting.

SIMILARITIES IN PATTERNS

Despite differences between the two groups of leaders, which we will expand on later in this paper, it is important to acknowledge three common patterns across both groups that suggested that leaders made a significant difference to their organizations regardless of the length of their tenure.

Defining success

When asked how they defined success, the answers from both groups of leaders were surprisingly similar: They tended to focus on their accomplishments in changing important internal aspects of their organizations or networks. For instance, some cited success in shifting their cultures, reforming their governance models, and/or formulating new organizational strategies. Other leaders defined their success by the way they effectively handled serious internal issues such as safeguarding failures, financial crises, and conflicts within their networks that threatened their organizations' viability. Interestingly, only two leaders (both still in their roles) defined success in terms of the impact their programs had had on the lives of the populations they serve. Of course, the argument can be made that the internal shifts that were cited were necessary predicates of greater external impact. However, this connection was rarely made explicitly in the interviews. One implication of this finding may be that the role of chief executive has evolved from the traditional concept of the ICSO leader as a charismatic spokesperson that effectively represents the organization to the outside world (when raising money, amplifying the brand, or advocating for policies) to a strong manager who can effectively navigate internal challenges and successfully pursue critical change efforts.

Assessing success

We asked the leaders in both groups to assess their success on a scale of 1–10. We anticipated that the length of time the executive spent in their role would be correlated with the impact they believed they'd had (in other words, longer tenure = greater impact/success). Our hypothesis proved correct, but the difference was much smaller than we had anticipated: LT leaders rated their success, on average, at 7.4 out of 10, while ST leaders rated their success, on average, at 6.9 out of 10. We had expected a more pronounced difference based on length of time in their leadership role.

Assuming these self-assessments by the leaders are fairly accurate, this pattern suggests that length of tenure may not always be a reliable predictor of success or impact.

Confronting multiple challenges

When reviewing our notes from the interviews, we noticed that leaders in both groups dealt with a remarkably similar set of challenges. In addition to the internal pressures we listed above, leaders described a host of external challenges that threatened their organizations. Among the most frequently mentioned external pressures were:

- The global COVID-19 pandemic

- Ever-growing demands for programs/services stemming from multiple concurrent crises

- Geopolitical, societal, and funding shifts such as the closing of civic space and the dramatic de-prioritization of humanitarian and development assistance by multiple Western governments

- Attacks on the values widely held across the sector, such as diversity, equity, and inclusion

The internal and external challenges cited in the interviews represent an extraordinary set of demands placed upon ICSO executives which clearly make the role extremely difficult. One executive with whom we spoke asserted that surviving as an ICSO executive for five years or more in this era of

poly-crises was a real achievement! That remark, paired with these ever-expanding lists of crises, suggests that shorter tenures may become more the norm. This is a trend that we intend to track over the coming years.

DIFFERENCES IN PATTERNS

The interviews with leaders who were still in place provided us with a number of insights into how an ICSO executive can increase their chances of success despite having to deal with a host of demands and challenges. In this section, we explore some of the more notable insights, which also represent differences in how these executives weathered challenges compared to those who left their positions.

Securing strong board alignment

The challenges of establishing and maintaining a strong relationship between management teams and boards were mentioned in virtually every interview. Leaders spoke about the importance of creating agreement between the board and the executives on a host of items including strategy, organizational priorities, expectations of the role, decision rights, measures of success, and the boundaries between the board and management. Several LT executives described how they explicitly negotiated and documented agreements on these items early in their terms with their board chairs. Meanwhile, many of the ST leaders shared examples of how they struggled with their boards throughout much of their tenures. For example, one leader described how their board insisted on being involved in many traditional management decisions such as hiring/firing decisions. Another chief executive shared how they had to deal with a board that was constantly shifting priorities and expectations from one month to the next. Finally, another ST executive leader felt that their board provided insufficient support when tensions arose between the secretariat and several member organizations in their federation.

Building strong leadership teams

The majority of executives in our sample inherited senior management teams from their predecessors. Several LT leaders described how they fundamentally rebuilt their senior management teams, letting some incumbents go and recruiting new leaders. Their actions were difficult and unpopular, since departing leaders were often long-time employees and had loyal followings among staff. These LT executives described, however, that the risk of keeping poor-performing yet much-beloved senior leaders in place was unacceptable. On the other hand, several ST executives regretted that they did not act decisively and quickly enough to replace executives on their teams who were either unwilling and/or unable to contribute at the levels required. They reported feeling hobbled during their tenure by ineffective or problematic team members.

Matching a leader's profile with organizational needs/expectations

The majority of executives in our sample were external hires—not new to the sector, but new to the organizations they were asked to lead. Hiring executives from outside an organization carries significant risk. It is well documented in the private sector that a significant number of external executive hires (40–50%) fail in their initial 18 months on the job. One of the primary factors for this high rate of failure is a mismatch between the leader's profile and what the organizational situation requires.[6] We found evidence that this mismatch can be just as challenging in ICSOs as in the private sector. Chief among these mismatches were:

- Being hired as a change agent but then being expected to not upset powerful, vested interests

- Being hired to be a tactical problem-solver but also needing to be a compelling visionary

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[6] Watkins, Michael. *The First 50 Days: Proven Strategies for Getting Up to Speed Faster and Smarter.* Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2013*.*

- Being hired as an effective external advocate and spokesperson but needing to spend the majority of time on internal matters

- Being hired for specific sector experience and expertise but needing to perform as a general manager of a complex organization

While some executives can adapt their leadership approach to the needs of the moment, most tend to have a set of strengths and preferences that they rely on, especially when under stress. It became apparent to us that the skills, expertise, and leadership principles that had served many of the ST leaders well in prior roles were not as effective or as valued in their new roles. Complicating this picture was the fact that the expectations some new ST leaders had about their roles were not always the ones that were in play once they began performing their executive duties. This greatly exacerbated the mismatch between the leader's profile and what the circumstances demanded.

It appeared, however, that the LT executives were better able to leverage and/or adapt their strengths and experiences to match the needs of their organizations and the expectations of their boards. This observation requires more in-depth exploration.

Managing and leveraging crises

Every leader we spoke with had had to deal with multiple crises during their tenure—from managing through the global COVID-19 pandemic to navigating other threats like financial challenges or safeguarding scandals. Strong crisis management skills characterized most of the leaders across our sample. Several (especially those from the private sector) commented on how their prior experience prepared them to handle the threats to their organizations. In some cases, the result of this effective crisis management was an observable increase in staff morale and cohesion due to knowing that they had pulled through an extraordinary challenge together. Many of these crises also led to an acceleration of cultural changes, especially in the widespread adoption of digital tools to communicate and collaborate.

However, it seemed that some of the LT leaders went beyond merely managing their crises successfully—they found ways to leverage these crises to their advantage. For instance, one leader described how they pursued much-needed changes in their organization while their board was distracted by dysfunction among its members. Another leader described how they used a series of natural disasters to reimagine their programmatic strategy, amplify their reputation, and subsequently raise more funds from private giving. Yet another leader described how they used the crisis among network members to solidify strong 1:1 relationships with other leaders in their network in order to consolidate their power and influence. Some of the ST leaders in our sample, on the other hand, often found themselves consumed by just trying to "get through" their crises and unable to turn the situations to their advantage.

In light of the increasing rise of right-wing governments around the globe who are suspicious of and hostile toward civil society institutions, it remains to be seen if the crisis management that has served some organizations so well will be adequate to meet the challenge. As one executive put it, "We are seeing a once-in-a-generation sea change in attitudes and actions toward our sector."

Managing dilemmas

One of the patterns that resonated with us as former chief executives was the frequent mention of dilemmas that our participant leaders had to manage as part of their roles. Virtually all the leaders we spoke with mentioned one or more dilemmas that they had to balance. Some examples included:

- Prioritizing consensus building while making decisions quickly

- Trusting others to deliver on commitments while exercising closer oversight and control

- Articulating deeply held perspectives and values at the risk of creating conflict and/or being polarizing

- Acting in an ethical manner while dealing with unethical actors

- Pursuing needed (sometimes unpopular) changes without destabilizing the organization and/or losing support of their boards, staff, and other partners

- Balancing the needs of the whole with the needs of the few

- Navigating near-term threats and opportunities while making decisions that ensure long-term sustainability and impact

- Executing policies that did not match with their personal preferences

While all leaders in our sample encountered significant dilemmas, it appeared that the leaders still in place had developed the capability and capacity to more effectively find balance in navigating between the two horns of the dilemmas they were facing. They did not frame these issues in binary terms such as right or wrong, black or white, but rather as issues that had to be approached with nuance. They reported that this often meant they had to take stands or adopt approaches that were out of their comfort zone and difficult.[7]

Sustaining resilience

It seems like a massive statement of the obvious, but the job of chief executive in civil society is one of dealing with a seemingly unending series of external threats, internal challenges, and intrapersonal struggles. These pressures test the strength and resolve of even the most resilient leaders. Among the LT executives, we found several clues to how they have weathered this unrelenting assault on their attention and energy.

- The first pattern was a *sense of purpose* in pursuing something not only bigger than themselves but bigger than their organizations. The majority of leaders who were still in place at the time we interviewed them were leading faith-based organizations. They saw their mission as something that is timeless and supersedes the episodic threats and

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[7] See Conner Advisory's white paper *What Comes First, the Mission or Me*.

opportunities they encountered. This deep and durable sense of purpose may have better girded these leaders for the extraordinary demands they faced day in and day out.

- The second pattern was appointing an effective *"second-in-command"*—a deputy, a chief of staff, or some sort of senior officer who could extend and amplify the executive's bandwidth and influence. For example, we heard how some of these deputies often took care of following up on internal decisions and actions while the chief executives stayed focused on dealing with external issues and opportunities. In other scenarios, the second-in-command was tasked with dealing with the more operational issues while the chief executive concentrated on longer-term strategic planning and goals. Given that ICSO executive roles will continue to be extraordinarily demanding, it seems that assigning a deputy role should be a more common practice and warrants additional consideration.

- Finally, some of the leaders still in place shared that they *avoided getting emotionally involved* in the decisions they had to make and the actions they needed to take. This was mentioned primarily by leaders who had come from the private sector for whom running a complex humanitarian or development organization was akin to running a commercial business—trying to make the most out of whatever resources were available and not worrying overly about the difficult actions they had to take. While these leaders appeared to be deeply committed to their missions, they seemed to have the capacity (or predisposition) to compartmentalize their emotions when making tough calls. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which experience in the rough-and-tumble, sometimes ruthless private sector better prepares executives for the challenges they encounter in civil society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The patterns described above suggest that there is a set of actions that senior leaders and their boards could take to increase the odds that a new chief executive will have a successful tenure.

For chief executives

- Assess as honestly as possible how well your leadership strengths (skills, experience, and predisposition) **match the needs and circumstances** of the organization you are considering leading. Does the organization primarily need a visionary leader? A transformational change agent? An exceptional operational manager? A compelling policy advocate? An effective fundraiser?

- Proactively **negotiate with your board chair** the terms of your relationship as early as possible in your tenure—what the board expects from you, how your success will be measured, which decisions belong to management and which to the board, etc. Document and share these agreements with the board chair. Schedule periodic meetings with the board chair to revisit the agreements, to discuss specifically the **quality of the working relationship**, and to agree on any issues that need to be addressed.

- **Declare your priorities and values** early and frequently during your tenure. Reinforce the agreements you have reached with the board and that you expect your team to pursue. Minimize the chances for any misinterpretation of what you intend to achieve during your time as chief executive.

- Assess the strength and character of the executive team you inherit and **make needed changes as early as possible** in your tenure. The costs of delaying the replacement of underperforming or uncooperative members of the executive team will far outweigh the risks of making some personnel mistakes.

- Be vigilant in **prioritizing your time and energy**. Surround yourself with a competent team and strong second-in-command (e.g., deputy, chief of staff) to whom you can **confidently delegate** important responsibilities while you focus on critical priorities.

For boards

- Ensure that adequate **succession planning** is in place. Assume you may have to replace your chief executive with little or no advanced notice.

- Pay particular attention to the **leadership predisposition** a new executive will need given the circumstances in which your organization finds itself (e.g., recovery, transformation, growth, sustaining success). Does a candidate have the experience, mindsets, and emotional profile that best match the challenges they will be expected to address?

- Have a plan for **establishing strong alignment** with the chief executive as early as possible in their tenure. Invest in building and **strengthening the working relationship** with the chief executive. Schedule periodic meetings to specifically discuss the quality of the relationship and to agree on actions to address any gaps that have surfaced in the relationship.

- Be attentive to the **level and nature of support needed** by executive management, whether in executing a new strategy, handling a crisis, making tough decisions, or taking on some specific responsibilities such representing the organization among key external stakeholders.

- Ensure that the chief executive surrounds him/herself with **a team of competent leaders** and other support mechanisms (e.g., a strong deputy) to navigate the myriad demands with which they will be required to contend.

CONCLUSION

Despite the increasingly challenging environment within which they now operate, the chief executives we spoke with demonstrated on the whole an amazing ability to meet the moment. The external threats they encountered, many of which could have been or might still be existential, did not seem to overcome their ability to lead. Instead, the most significant factors that led many to depart their roles, as our interviews revealed, were internal organizational pressures that left some feeling demoralized, frustrated, and impotent. Interestingly, it was successfully addressing significant

internal challenges that gave most of the leaders in our sample their greatest sense of accomplishment. If indeed handling internal challenges is both the most significant risk to a successful tenure as well as the source of greatest pride, it suggests that boards may want to pay particular attention to the experience and qualities of the executives they recruit and support, asking: Does this executive have the right mix of experience, expertise, and leadership predisposition to successfully navigate the dynamics that are at play within the organization we are asking them to lead?

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ANNEX: REFERENCES TO RELATED RESEARCH REPORTS

In recent years, two studies were conducted that focused on similar questions. "Understanding the Pathology of Large INGOs," authored by Oliver Hudson and Mwikali Muthiani, is a first effort to understand the institutional crises surrounding large INGOs and covers six principal dimensions that influence the challenging leadership conditions.

The study explores the internal and external challenges faced by INGOs. It is structured around several key themes that intertwine to outline the operational difficulties and prospects for these organizations: boards, leadership, organizational structure, structural racism and neocolonialism, activist employees, and funding model.

It concludes with the rather sobering statement that "internal, institutional dysfunction is endemic amongst the non-profit sector, although the level to which this dysfunction exists and impacts each organization differs."

"Who Do You Think You Are? The Past, Present, and Future of International NGOs," authored by Mike Aaronson and Andrew Thompson, is part of the INGOs and the Long Humanitarian Century research program, conducted over three years by the University of Oxford, which explores the evolving role of INGOs in a rapidly changing world. The report highlights the historical context of INGOs and identifies key questions for their leadership in addressing contemporary challenges. It adds several external dimensions like digital revolution, social movements, and geopolitics to the internal leadership challenges. It describes INGOs as being at a turning point and calls their leaders to refocus on the founding purposes of their organizations, reassert their ideals, and update their missions to take account of present realities so they can better meet the needs of the most vulnerable people.

Comparing the two studies (and how our observations relate to them)

Similarities

Internal challenges:

Both studies emphasize the internal crises within organizations and the significant challenges they face. The Oxford research identifies challenges such as governance issues, leadership struggles, and organizational complexity, while "Understanding the Pathology" highlights similar issues like dysfunctional boards, leadership struggles, and complex organizational structures.

In our interviews, internal crises that go beyond "governance challenges" included safeguarding issues, toxic culture, structural racism, and ethical dilemmas.

Leadership issues:

Both studies discuss leadership issues extensively. The Oxford research outlines how leaders struggle with decision-making and are often ill-prepared, while "Understanding the Pathology" stresses the lack of preparedness among CEOs and the need for leadership that is more responsive and inclusive.

In our interviews, leaders portrayed themselves as usually capable of handling their job and tended to point to the problems around them (incapable boards and management teams) as well as the complexities of their tasks.

Need for reform:

Both studies stress the importance of reforming organizational structures. The Oxford research mentions simplifying structures and increasing accountability, while "Understanding the Pathology" emphasizes the need for INGOs to address their internal dysfunctions through structural change and a focus on diversity and inclusivity.

Diversity and inclusivity:

Both studies highlight the importance of diversity and inclusivity within governance structures. The Oxford research mentions the need for boards with diverse representation, while "Understanding the Pathology" stresses that the sector must address issues such as structural racism, patriarchy, and neocolonialism.

We heard a bit of this. Our leaders seemed to have a much more functional view of their positions and tasks.

Differences

Scope and focus:

The Oxford research focuses on a broader range of INGOs and their external challenges in the context of humanitarian aid and development work, with a particular emphasis on governance and financial issues. "Understanding the Pathology" focuses specifically on the internal dynamics of large INGOs, detailing leadership issues, organizational structure, and employee activism.

External pressures:

The Oxford research discusses external pressures on INGOs, such as geopolitical instability, the COVID-19 pandemic, and shifting funding models. In contrast, "Understanding the Pathology" has a more internal focus, addressing structural racism, employee activism, and the complexity of organizational frameworks.

The leaders we interviewed discussed both internal and external pressures fairly equally and extensively.

Recommendations and solutions:

The Oxford research offers concrete recommendations for INGOs to adopt, such as embracing servant-leadership principles, decolonizing practices, and fostering collaborative approaches to funding. "Understanding the Pathology" suggests a broader approach, emphasizing the need for

INGOs to adapt to changing external environments and engage in sector-wide reforms for better sustainability.

In addition to the recommendations that we made in this paper, we heard, more than once, that leadership styles may have to be much more assertive than the Oxford research recommends.

Employee activism:

"Understanding the Pathology" provides a more detailed look at the rise of activist employees within INGOs, describing it as both a challenge and an opportunity for change. The Oxford research mentions employee activists but gives more attention to board-level issues and leadership challenges, with less attention paid to the role of employees.

Employee activism was not mentioned by the leaders we interviewed.