

High-quality Research Support (HQRS) Programme

**The role of conflict management in organizational performance**  
**Case Study: Somali National University**

High-quality Research Support programme (HQRS)

September 2016

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

This research concept paper examines the Role of Conflict Management in organizational performance of businesses and institutions in Somalia by initially focusing on one organization. It seeks to explore how conflict is understood and managed at the Somali National University (SNU), in Mogadishu. Conflict occurs in all aspects of everyday life including in the workplace but it is only when conflict is properly managed that effective organisational development is more likely (*Jones J.R. and Gorge J M., 2000.*) Numerous studies from around the world have shown that effective conflict management contributes to greater employee satisfaction and increased productivity yet this study has found no evidence of any prior research into the role of conflict management in the workplace in Somalia.

A generally accepted principle is that when conflict is well managed, then organizational performance is higher and employees are more satisfied but when conflict is managed inappropriately, employees are more likely to feel dissatisfied and organizational performance suffers. For the purposes of this study, I decided upon a definition of conflict management in the workplace, the types of organisational conflict, the causes of organisational conflict and the conflict process from the existing literature and used it as a basis to compare the experience of employees at the Somali National University.

## **Background and context**

SNU is a good example of a typical Somali organization. It is well established and is one of the larger employers in Mogadishu. The university has a long and proud tradition with alumni that include many notable Somalis including the current President of The Federal Government, Hassan Sheikh Mahmaoud and the President of Puntland, Abdiweli Gas. The university was established in 1954 and Obtained official university status in 1969. In 1973, under the Supreme Revolutionary Council (SRC), programs and facilities were expanded and it developed over the next twenty years into an institution of higher learning, with 13 departments, 700 staff, and over 15,000 students. It closed down during the many years of conflict officially reopening in August 2014. On 14 November 2013, the cabinet approved a federal government plan to reopen it and on 18 September 2014, some 480 pupils took the university's entry exams. Today the SNU has three campuses comprising six faculties: economics, education, law, medicine, agriculture; and veterinary and animal husbandry.

## **RESEARCH: OVERALL AIM AND SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

### **The overall aim of the research is:**

- ❖ To identify the understanding, cause and effect of conflict management on organizational performance in Somali national university.

### **Objectives of the research**

- To know to what extent the role of Conflict Management in organizational performance is understood
- To investigate the causes of Conflict Management on organizational performance
- To examine ways in which conflict is managed

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Semi-structured interviews**

Interviews were conducted with five employees of the University and included the Human Resources Manager, two line managers and two general staff. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed because it is an effective yet low-cost way to collect data from the target population of the study.

## **DESK RESEARCH**

“Open communication and collaboration enhance the flow of new ideas and strengthen work relationships, which can have positive effecton employee morale. Regular feedback and timely resolution of conflict have the potential of improving employee satisfaction and job performance.”  
(*Awan and Anjum, 2015*).

There is a wealth of available literature that considers the role of conflict management in organisational performance however, this research found no published literature in respect of Somalia. As a starting point therefore, the following definitions and principles informed the collection and analysis of the data for this study:

### **Definition of conflict management:**

For the purpose of this study the precept is taken that “Conflict is a fact of life in any organization, as long as people compete for jobs, resources, power, recognition and security, In addition, dealing with conflicts is a great challenge to management” (Adomi and Anie, 2005). Furthermore, Ikeda (2005) observed that organizational conflict involves interpersonal conflict between colleagues or supervisors or inter-group conflict between different section of an organization.

### **Types of organisational conflict**

Imazai (2002) identifies two essential types of conflict in organizations: vertical and horizontal. Vertical conflict occurs in groups of different hierarchical levels, such as manager and subordinate, whereas horizontal conflict occurs between individuals at the same level. Instances of vertical conflict occur more frequently and have greater impact than horizontal conflict because causal factors tend to equalize in people of equivalent hierarchical levels (Robbins, 1983). When vertical conflict occurs, employees are more likely to feel they are not properly involved in the organization and neither are their needs met. In short, they feel powerless and alienated. (Ikeda et al, 2005) argues that types of organisational conflict usually stem either from differences in value and ideology or from disagreements over benefits, salary, and working conditions.

### **The Conflict Process:**

The theory of conflict as a process consisting of five stages is attributed to Pondy (1967). McShane (2008) developed this further into five stages comprising:

- i. potential opposition or incompatibility;
- ii. Cognition and personalization;
- iii. Intentions;
- iv. Behaviour;
- v. Outcome

This study aims to consider the role of conflict management at Somali National University within this framework.

## **LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This study is not intended to be a comprehensive study but rather the precursor to a more in-depth study. It is limited by the fact that there is no available public library which the Somali researcher can

use to gather secondary data. In addition, no research has previously been conducted in this subject area in Somalia. Furthermore, because of the security situation in Mogadishu, it is impossible to approach most organisations and expect them to participate in research, particularly on a sensitive subject such as conflict in a post-conflict state, even when the conflict in question is not concerned with national security.

## **FINDINGS:**

### **Understanding of conflict management:**

All employees interviewed were asked to explain their understanding of conflict management. All gave an answer, which was close to a textbook definition albeit that they used their own words. The responses are summarized below:

“Conflict is a misunderstanding between two parties when each person believes he is right”

“Conflict is a serious disagreement or argument that occurs between two people or two groups”

“Conflict management is the method to follow to seek a solution to conflict”

### **Types of Conflict that occurs between employees and their managers:**

The research sought to understand the types of conflict that occur. The respondents identified different situations such as conflict between employees and their managers but also gave examples such as a student refusing to follow the guidelines of the university. This was expanded into an example of students who fail to observe the rule that there should be silence in the library. Arguments regularly break out between groups of students and between students and the staff who work in the library when conversations or discussions take place.

Two general examples between staff were that conflict can occur when it is not clear who is responsible for doing a job or when a job is not done well. More specific examples of conflict between staff included the number of hours a teacher is expected to work and the fact that some teachers would prefer more flexible working arrangements, whilst others prefer a set timetable, which can lead to a conflict between different teachers and also between teachers and the management teams within the different faculties.

All respondents were in agreement that it was important that conflict should be properly managed. Types of conflict stated by interviewers fits into the types of conflict identified by the desk research in vertical and horizontal conflicts. So this limited study tells us that the same types of conflict happen at work in Somalia, as happen anywhere else in the world.

### **Causes of conflict:**

A key objective of this research is to understand the causes of conflict at all levels of the organization. In order to achieve this, all employees were asked what they believe were the most common causes of conflict. There were many ideas which are summarized below:

Poor communication:

“When a department believes it is sending a well-intended message to another department but if unclear words are used the message can easily be misunderstood.”

Poor performance:

“Poor performance can happen when the university loses its relationship with other world universities or the policies of the university are weak. These things can cause performance to suffer and these factors can cause conflict which is directly related to poor performance”

Salary payments

Salary came across as a big issue and is one of the key motivations for the staff interviewed. The general view was that salary scales should be equivalent to the level of staff so if one staff member is more knowledgeable and experienced s/he will earn more but this is often subjective and when people compare salaries it often leads to conflict.

The key factors that cause conflict according to the interviewees are listed below:

- 1- Poor communication/misunderstanding
- 2- Poor performance.
- 3- Salary comparison causes conflict among employees who work together

There were many examples of behavior but less awareness of the other parts of the conflict process.

### **Effects of conflict:**

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Although conflict is a big problem that faces every level of the organization, it is a necessary to get a proper solution in order to maintain the sustainability of the organization and increase the goodwill and performance of the organization.

There are several ways that conflict can affect the performance of the organization. The interviewees discussed how conflict can affect organization, which can be divided into two ideas:

First: conflict that is managed well. If the managers and executives of the organization manage conflict well and search for a proper solution towards this conflict it will affect the organization in a positive way, the staff will be more satisfied with the job, they will have a good attitude, they will try to be more proactive and their proficiency will be high. All of this will increase the performance of the organization.

Alternatively when conflict is a problem, the dangers are greater. If the conflict has not got a suitable solution or managers have not dealt with it well it can damage an organization and there will be less good will, all the interviewees were agreed on this point.

So the conclusion of this is that conflict can affect the organization two ways, 1- positive way 2- negative way.

### **Managing conflict:**

It was not possible during this study to identify exactly how conflict is managed within SNU. The respondents shared the opinion that conflicts should be effectively resolved and agreed that when conflict is handled well staff are more proactive and the organization functions better but there was limited awareness beyond that. When asked how the university managed conflict it seemed that a traditional, hierarchical approach is taken. Every department or every faculty is responsible for managing conflict within their own domain and in their own way. If however they are unable to resolve the conflict, then it passes up the hierarchy until it reached the President of the university who is the final arbitrator. It was difficult to find out more about how conflict is managed, which may be because there is no formal system but this has not been verified.

### **CONCLUSIONS:**

The study has identified that conflict management is understood at SNU even if it is only informally. Furthermore, it is understood, that conflict managed well will increase the performance of the organization and that poor conflict management will have a negative effect. The study found the common causes of conflict in the university to be poor communication, poor performance, and conflict over salary payments. This study was unable to find a common system for managing conflict beyond traditional and ad hoc methods.

It was interesting to discover the level of understanding of conflict management and it would be useful to know whether this is typical of other organizations in Somalia, for example smaller organizations or organizations that do not have international links. There have been no other studies in the country looking at the subject of conflict management so this is also a gap that needs to be addressed.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- 1- The SNU should develop appropriate strategies to resolve and manage conflict. There should be training to help staff to better understand conflict and deal with issues earlier before they become a problem.
- 2- Communication could be improved for example between different departments to avoid misunderstandings which can escalate.
- 3- There needs to be more research into the role of conflict management on organizational performance in Somalia which looks at a wider number of organizations by size and sector.

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