

Chapter 8

Conclusions and recommendations

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter highlights the conclusions of this study and recommendations for future research in this area. As such, it brings together both the theoretical and empirical phases of the study. Figure 8.1 illustrates the relationship of this chapter to the rest of this dissertation.

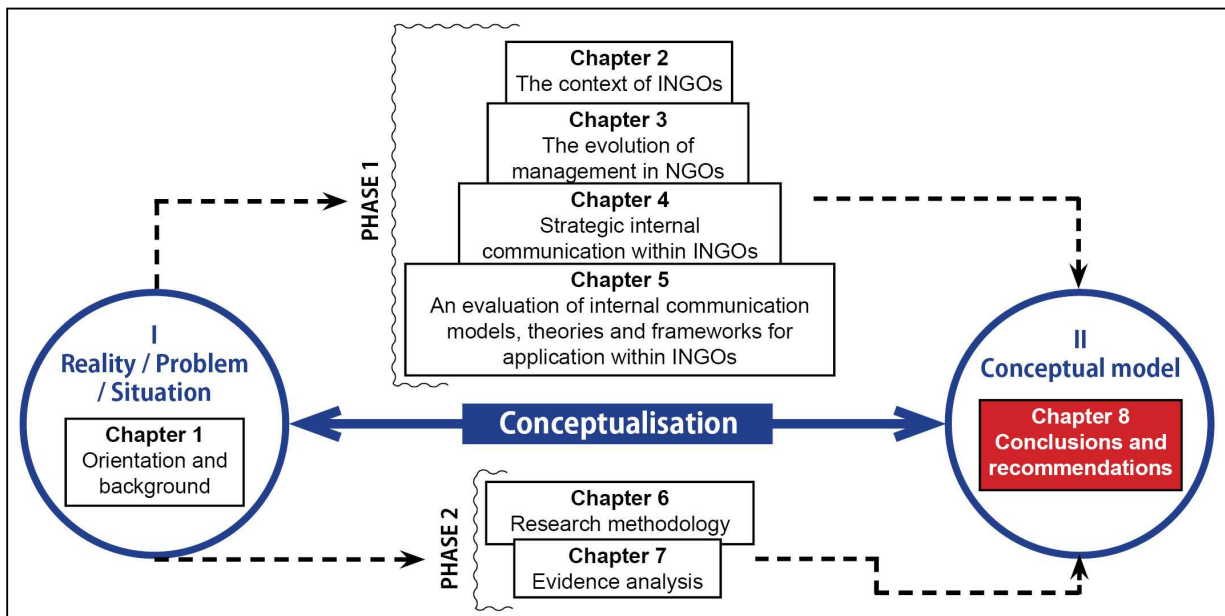


Figure 8.1: Chapter 8 in relation to the other chapters

This chapter is divided into six parts. The first section considers the three objectives of this study. The second section considers the overall research question and provides an explicit answer. The third section highlights recommendations for future research in this area as well as for practitioners working in internal communication in INGOs. The fourth and fifth sections identify the unique contributions of this study and its limitations respectively. Finally, the sixth section provides some concluding remarks on this dissertation.

8.2 CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the current state of strategic internal communication in INGOs in order to answer the research question “*does internal communication in INGOs function strategically.*” In order to answer the research question and achieve this study’s aim, Chapter 1 identified three objectives which the theoretical and empirical phase of this study attempted to meet. The following identifies the main conclusions that were derived from pursuing these objectives.

8.2.1 Objective 1

The first objective of this study was *to identify key components of strategic internal communication in INGOs through a review and synthesis of relevant literature.* Meeting this objective requires the consideration of two elements: strategic internal communication and the INGO context. These are each discussed below.

8.2.1.1 Strategic internal communication

In Chapter 4, strategic internal communication was defined as “*the strategic management of communication to align the organisation’s internal stakeholders with its strategic intent.*” The strategic functioning of internal communication is derived directly from its relationship to strategic communication, particularly as outlined by Steyn and Puth (2000). As such, in order for internal communication to be considered strategic, it must possess the following key elements:

- The **purpose** must be to achieve strategic alignment
- The **position** must be part of the senior management in the organisation and must play a **role** in both strategy development and strategy implementation
- The most senior communicator must possess the **knowledge** to understand and implement the strategic role of the function.
- The **content** must be focused around the organisation’s strategic intent

In addition to possessing these elements, several normative characteristics of the process of internal communication were also identified, including a strategic orientation that links

internal communication to the communication and organisational strategy (Mellor & Dewhurst, 2008; Steyn & Puth, 2000), commitment for senior leadership (Argenti & Forman, 2002:154) and a holistic view of the internal communication infrastructure. Symmetrical communication is also important to develop the commitment of internal stakeholders (Grunig, 1992:531). From the postmodern perspective, the emphasis is placed on dialogue as a means of engaging with internal stakeholders to develop the strategic intent and a shared understanding of it (Puth, 2002; Ströh, 2007). As per the social constructivist worldview, it is through dialogue and communication that change can occur and, therefore, encouraging dialogue on the direction and future of the organisation is an important component of strategic internal communication.

8.2.1.2 INGO context

In Chapter 2, INGOs were defined as “*organised, private, not profit-distributing, self-governing, and voluntary entities working to improve the social, economic or cultural well-being of society in two or more countries*” (see Salamon *et al.*, 2004:8; Swilling and Russell, 2002:11). As part of their organisational form, INGOs have key context-related characteristics. In particular, they have complex operating environments with multiple stakeholders and multiple accountabilities. The result is what Anheier (2005:229) refers to as the “law of nonprofit complexity” which says that CSOs (and INGOs) tend to be more complex than businesses of comparable size. In addition to the multiple stakeholders, this characteristic is intensified due to missing profit motive and prominence of value-based missions in CSOs.

The unique characteristics of the INGO context require a composite framework of management, as proposed by Lewis (2007) that draws insight from business, CSO and development management. In particular, the complexity of the INGO context calls for the application of more postmodern forms of management for these organisations. In order to negotiate multiple stakeholders and changing environmental factors, INGOs must be flexible and adaptable in their strategic management approach.

In addition, INGOs operate within local, regional and global social context. As part of civil society, their coordinating mechanism is shared values (Van Tulder & Van der Zwart, 2006:9) and they must live up to those values in their words and actions in order to

maintain their legitimacy (Kelly, 2007:89). As per the neo-institutionalist view of organisations, the social context of an INGO, through its own values and the values of the environments in which it works, impacts on the options it has to pursue its goals (Anheier, 2005:147). Postmodern strategic management again helps the organisation to negotiate these tensions and develop a shared understanding of its mission and values among all stakeholders.

The worldview of this study, integrated postmodernism and social constructivism, emphasises the deep dependence on context in terms of phenomenon such as strategic internal communication (Babbie & Mouton, 2001:45; Risse, 2007:128). Therefore, to fully meet the objective of identifying the key components of strategic internal communication in INGOs, it is important to consider strategic internal communication specifically within the INGO context. The result of this process was the identification of a variety of barriers and challenges for strategic internal communication in this context. For example, fragmentation of the INGO sector (Van Tulder & Van der Zwart, 2006:10), scarce resources (Anheier, 2005:352) and workforce-related barriers were all identified. These and many others are discussed in detail in Chapter 4. Addressing these challenges requires an emphasis on dialogue.

The social constructivist worldview identifies change as occurring through human interaction, thereby emphasising communication and discourse practices (Risse, 2007:131). Communication thus plays a central role in negotiating the complex relationships between the diverse players within the organisation (Ströh, 2007). The INGO context, and the barriers and challenges it poses, do not negate the need for strategic internal communication, but rather emphasises its role in the promotion of dialogue.

8.2.2 Objective 2

The second objective of this study is to *identify the current strategic internal communication practices of INGOs empirically*. This objective again requires the consideration of two elements: the function of strategic internal communication and the influence of the INGO context.

8.2.2.1 Strategic internal communication

Within the case studies, internal communication was identified as not being managed strategically. Some cases incorporated strategic elements into the function, but overall a formal strategic focus was lacking. Content focused on task- and project-related information. Communication of it was undertaken with the main purpose of information sharing. Only in one case was the senior communicator part of senior management and across all cases the position of the senior communicator was considered problematic. In addition, the role of the internal communication in strategy development and implementation was not apparent, with the senior communicator being only an advisor to the process and not an integral member of the strategy development and implementation team.

The process of internal communication within the INGOs studied was primarily asymmetrical. Current strategic internal communication practices are based on traditional linear, top-down forms of strategic management. However, dialogue was more prevalent in the smaller organisations and many of the cases were using or planning to use new technologies to improve organisation-wide dialogue and communication. As such, there is evidence of INGOs recognising the need to become more flexible, adaptable and dialogue-driven and they are starting to develop tools to achieve this. However, a major challenge that was identified by the communicators interviewed was that there is a lack of understanding within their organisations as to the role and importance of this function, making it difficult for it to move forward towards achieving its goals.

8.2.2.2 INGO context

The interviewees for the case studies, almost unanimously, describe a context for their organisation where there is significant influence from a wide variety of external stakeholders. This influence impacts on how strategy is developed, requiring it to be more flexible and adaptable to changing external contexts, but also limiting the room for internal stakeholders to play a role.

The case studies also brought to light a variety of other challenges and barriers for strategic internal communication in their specific context. One of particular note relates to

the value-centric characteristic of the INGO form. Within the postmodern worldview, values allow for the decentralisation of control and the self-organisation of the organisation, making it more flexible and adaptable in its environment (Ströh 2007:207). Strategic internal communication can assist in this process by encouraging dialogue around the organisation's value to ensure understanding and commitment to what they mean. However, compromising those values can threaten the survival of the organisation when the environment (for example, the public) can turn on it. It is precisely this problem that was identified in several of the case studies and poses a serious threat to the INGOs.

8.2.3 Objective 3

The third objective of this study is to *compare the empirical findings about current strategic internal communication practices in INGOs with the synthesis from the relevant literature*. This objective was pursued using the process described in Chapter 6. The conclusions of this process bring together both strategic internal communication and the INGO context and are thus discussed in combination below.

The role of values in INGOs and their complex context, as well as the challenges these both pose, were supported in both the literature (for example see Anheier, 2005) and the empirical evidence. The theory argued that these characteristics of INGOs made postmodern strategic management more appropriate than the traditional forms (see Chapter 3). None of the case studies showed conscious and committed adoption of postmodern strategic management, although Case A did illustrate several elements thereof. Thus the theoretical proposition that postmodern strategic management is the most appropriate management form for INGOs is not supported by current practices. However, there was evidence from several case studies of the need for flexible strategic management in order to adapt to changing contexts and the demands of multiple stakeholders. In addition, several cases noted a difficulty in remaining true to their values in their management activities. Theoretically, therefore, postmodern strategic management is still a viable process for addressing these challenges. In particular, a focus on dialogue and communication as part of the strategic management process can help ensure a flexible and adaptable strategic intent that negotiates the different interpretations of values within the organisation and the expectations of external stakeholders (Puth, 2002).

In addition to not undertaking postmodern strategic management, the case studies did not show evidence of practicing strategic internal communication, as described in Chapter 4. The empirical evidence from the case studies in terms of the content, purpose, position and knowledge of internal communication in INGOs did not match the normative ideal identified in the theory. It did not take the strategic focus outlined in Chapter 4, but neither did it provide any evidence that the theory was wrong or needed to be modified. What is apparent from the empirical evidence is that internal communication fulfils a wide variety of roles in INGOs, ranging from information sharing to knowledge management to capacity building. What is missing is the umbrella for these roles that ties them all together. That role is the strategic focus and purpose of strategic alignment that was discussed in Chapter 4.

Overall, the case studies did not show evidence of postmodern strategic internal communication but the theoretical foundation for the benefit of this concept if applied in INGOs remains sound. Instead, contextual, form-related, structural and cultural factors, identified in both literature and practice may be inhibiting the ability of INGOs to pursue postmodern strategic internal communication.

Many of the challenges and barriers posed by the INGO context identified in the literature (see Chapter 3 and 4) are supported by the empirical evidence from the case studies. For example, limited resources are a recurrent theme in both (Burnett, 2007:6; Lewis, 2007:199; Chapter 7). This is a major challenge for the development of strategic internal communication because it requires both financial and human resources to undertake.

In addition to limited financial resources, INGOs do not have just one environment, but multiple, complex environments over which they have very little direct control (Anheier, 2005:349). This proposition is supported in the case studies where the different expectations of external stakeholders were shown to both influence the management practices of INGOs and shrink the space available for internal stakeholder participation in the strategy development process. In theory, the available resources and context of an INGO can lead it to focus being more on satisfying donors instead of those to whom it is dedicated to serving (Ehlers & Lazenby, 2007:278). The need to conform to the often bureaucratic requirements of donors could inhibit an INGO from adopting a postmodern

approach to strategic management. In the empirical evidence, the influence from external context was shown to equate to less space for internal participation in strategy development. However, strategic internal communication has a specific role to play in strategy development by ensuring the views of internal stakeholders are incorporated in the process (Steyn & Puth, 2000; Grimshaw & Mike, 2008:30). Therefore, the limited space available for internal stakeholders to participate in strategy development may decrease the perceived need for strategic internal communication and inhibit its application in the INGO context.

Several characteristics of an INGO's structure can also help explain why it may not adopt postmodern strategic internal communication. Srinivasan (2007:189) describes how the funding structure of INGOs can lead to the establishment of silos, a fact confirmed in the case study evidence. While postmodern strategic internal communication has the potential to help overcome structural silos, these silos can also impede the application of this management tool. For example, as noted in the theory, structure should follow strategy (Boxall & Purcell, 2008:255; Robbins, 2002:191). However, where structure is firmly entrenched, it can inhibit an organisation's flexibility and ability to take a postmodern approach to strategic management. Similarly, as noted by Puth (2002:203), bureaucracy, programme silos and isolated work units can pose barriers to the establishment of cohesive strategic alignment. Where there is no cohesive strategic intent and each silo is focused only on its own goals, internal stakeholders are less likely to engage in strategic internal communication activities.

A second structural factor that can impede the application of strategic internal communication is the position of communication within the organisation. A position that is not part of senior management can prevent internal communication from playing its role in corporate strategy development and implementation (Grimshaw & Mike, 2008:28; Steyn & Puth, 2000). However, across all the case studies, the position of the internal communication was either not part of senior management or its position was tenuous. Strategic internal communication is dependent on support from senior management (Doorley & Garcia, 2007:145), therefore without easy access to this forum, it is very difficult to implement this function in the organisation. This issue is further compounded in the case studies by the poor understanding of the strategic role of internal communication,

another theoretical requirement for strategic internal communication (Grimshaw & Mike, 2008:28). Thus together, the position and role of strategic internal communication are major inhibiting factors for the application of strategic internal communication.

Finally, cultural elements may be inhibiting the application of postmodern strategic internal communication in INGOs. The action culture in INGOs, evident in many of the case studies and in the literature (Lewis, 2007:113), results in long-term improvement through activities like strategic internal communication being devalued compared to activities with immediate results. Becoming a learning organisation, such as the one described by Du Plooy-Cilliers (2003:33-34), has the potential to assist an INGO develop their internal capacity and not simply focus on immediate actions. The evidence from Case D, which has already developed processes in this regard, illustrates that a reflective learning culture is not antithetic to INGOs. However, INGOs must first overcome their action cultures and develop flexible and reflective cultures that support and value postmodern strategic internal communication despite the benefits not being immediately evident.

8.3 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

Now that the three objectives of this study have been met, it is possible to answer the main research question: “*does internal communication in INGOs function strategically?*” The answer is no. The empirical evidence from the case studies shows that internal communication in the INGOs studied does not fulfil the criteria for being strategic identified in the literature. Instead, internal communication fulfils primarily tactical and managerial roles, as defined by Steyn and Puth (2000), and is focused on information sharing and other task-related communication. There is some evidence that, in larger INGOs, internal communication does function more strategically, but even in these cases, it did not completely fulfil the theoretical criteria.

The empirical and theoretical evidence suggests several reasons why internal communication does not function strategically in INGOs. These include a lack of knowledge and understanding of the strategic role of internal communication (Grimshaw & Mike, 2008:28), both among communicators as well as within the organisations; limited time and finances (Burnett, 2007:6; Lewis, 2007:199) that, combined with an action culture

(Lewis, 2007:113), results in poor investment of resources in the function; and elements of context and stakeholder pressure (Anheier, 2005:251) that prevent internal communication from playing the role it should.

The implication of internal communication not functioning strategically in INGOs is that there is a high potential for a lack of strategic alignment within the organisation. The result is that INGOs will not gain the benefits that postmodern strategic internal communication has to offer them. The literature (see Chapter 4) identifies a wide variety of benefits if internal communication functions strategically, including employee commitment (Dolphin, 2005:171; Meyer & De Wet, 2007:31), improved morale, increased retentions and an overall benefit to its financial bottom-line (Asif & Sargeant, 2000:299; Yates, 2006:72). For INGOs, strategic internal communication has the additional theoretical benefit of helping the organisation navigate its complex environment and negotiate its adherence to its core values in order to build a cohesive organisation working to achieve a single strategic intent. This is particularly the case when implemented from a postmodern perspective with an emphasis on dialogue with stakeholders (Foreman, 1997:18). By guiding the social construction of reality through dialogue, this process can improve organisational performance by giving focus and maintaining legitimacy. The empirical evidence, however, does not show this occurring in current practices for contextual, structural and cultural reasons as discussed in the previous section.

8.4 UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

This study has two unique contributions. First, it contributes to the academic research on the strategic functioning of internal communication. Second, it contributes the academic research on the internal management, and internal communication in particular, of INGOs.

As was noted earlier in Chapter 4, academic research on internal communication is limited. In particular, research on the strategic function of internal communication is lacking. This study makes a unique contribution by compiling and synthesising the theory in this area, as well as examining it within a particular context. By bringing together authors such as Doorley and Garcia (2007:129), Foreman (1997:19), Grimshaw and Mike (2008:28), Puth (2002), Steyn and Puth (2000), Verwey & du Plooy-Cilliers (2003) and

Welch and Jackson (2007), this study presents a normative ideal for strategic internal communication that synthesises the theory already present in the literature.

This study contributes to the internal communication research by testing this theory in a unique context, the INGO, thus providing additional support for the key elements of strategic internal communication identified in the literature. In addition, this study contributes to the theory around strategic internal communication by considering the different elements of this management practice from a postmodern perspective, drawing on authors such as Franklin (1998) and Ströh, (2007). Overall, this study contributes the academic research on internal communication by outlining a postmodern approach to strategic internal communication.

The second contribution of this study relates to its context, the INGO. Strategic internal communication is both an internal management function and a communication management function. As was noted in Chapters 2 and 3, research on NGO management is limited, but even rarer is research on internal management within NGOs. Similarly, only a few articles were found within the communication management field that consider the NGO context (for exceptions see Janse van Rensburg, 2003; Steyn & Nunes, 2001; Hewitt, 2006; Seshadri & Carstenson, 2007). In addition, the research that does look at internal communication is generally focused on for-profit organisations. Therefore, this study makes a unique contribution by examining strategic internal communication in the INGO context. It thus fills a void in the literature between strategy, internal communication and the NGO.

This study's contribution in this regard is by considering the synthesis of the internal communication theory within the unique framework of the INGO. Drawing on authors in the field of NGO management such as Anheier (2005) and Lewis (2007), this study identifies the unique characteristics of the INGO context, form, structure, culture and workforce that may impact the application of strategic internal communication in these organisations. Based on these characteristics, it concludes that a postmodern approach to this management concept has the most potential benefit for INGOs. The empirical phase of the study considers these theoretically identified elements within actual INGOs. While the study determines that postmodern strategic internal communication is not applied in

practice within INGOs, it contributes to this area of research by noting that this approach does have potential benefit in this context and identifying key contextual, structural and cultural barriers that may be inhibiting the application of this approach in INGOs. Overall, this study contributes to the NGO management literature by providing a foundation for further studies exploring the potential contribution of strategic internal communication and the barriers that need to be overcome to achieve this.

8.5 LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations. These relate specifically to the context in which it is undertaken, the concept under study and the methodology used. These are each discussed next.

The study was conducted among INGOs operating in South Africa. As such, the results of the study are limited to this context. In addition, because it was not possible to speak to head offices as well as local offices for all cases, not all case studies may accurately reflect internal communication throughout the organisation, but only as it pertains to regional offices in South Africa.

This study focused on the strategic function of internal communication or strategic internal communication. The concept has not been widely studied. The constructs and elements of this concept are based on strategic communication and internal communication theory; however, they have not been empirically tested in other contexts. As such, the validity of the constructs is limited.

Finally, several elements of the methodology used limit the conclusions. Only five case studies were completed and there was limited data from these. Two of the five case studies had no organisational documents. In addition, the meta-theoretical position of this study is that reality is socially constructed and differs based on the perspectives of individuals. This study only interviewed local senior communicators and therefore, with some support from strategy documents, the results of this study are limited to their perspectives and may not accurately reflect the reality throughout the organisation.

8.6 RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study lead to several recommendations in two areas: strategic internal communication in INGOs and further research. These are discussed next.

8.6.1 Strategic internal communication in INGOs

The conclusions of this study suggest that INGOs would benefit if their internal communication functioned more strategically. By integrating their internal communication activities under the banner of strategic alignment, these activities would work together to build cohesion and commitment within the organisation. As Puth (2002) describes, through strategic discourse strategic consciousness is raised and employees can implement the organisation's strategic intent within their own area of work ensuring that the entire organisation works together towards the same goals. The internal communication infrastructure needs to be considered holistically so that the actions and words of senior leadership and the values of the organisation are reflected in all communication channels.

INGOs are challenged by their complex environments, their vague missions and their foundation on values (Anheier, 2005). The theory in this study, with support from the empirical evidence, suggests that INGOs would benefit from adopting more flexible, process-orientated strategic management that emphasised dialogue among stakeholders over top-down communication and directives. The postmodern approach to strategic management could help INGOs negotiate their complex environments, strengthen their vague missions and remain true to their core values. Thus, this approach could help stave off questions of legitimacy and improve the performance of the organisation.

Similar to the problem identified by Grimshaw and Mike (2008), a major challenge for internal communication in INGOs is the lack of knowledge among both communicators and the organisation as a whole regarding the strategic role of this function. INGOs could provide additional support and training for their communicators to strengthen their own knowledge and give them the tools to educate and build a communication culture within the organisation. However, INGOs also need to promote a widespread culture of learning within their organisations, to counteract the widespread 'action culture in INGOs (Lewis, 2007). Only through a learning culture will continuous improvement and reflection be

valued for more than its immediate impact. Finally, communicators in general may benefit from more emphasis on internal communication within communication management curricula at institutions of higher education. While internal communication should not be over-emphasised in terms of its importance for education and training, it is important that the unique needs and considerations for this function are recognised.

8.6.2 Further research

This study is exploratory and designed only to provide a foundation for further research in this area. There are several recommendations for how this study can be built upon.

Firstly, the focus on INGOs in South Africa limits this study. Further research on the strategic functioning of internal communication in different contexts would help to broaden the validity of the study and result in more specific conclusions. The different contexts could take several forms, including the head offices of INGOs across multiple countries, NGOs within South Africa, and a focus on a particular size and structure of NGO.

Secondly, the study is limited to the perspective of the senior communicator and what is included in organisational documents. By its nature, internal communication spans the fence with human resources and considering this perspective in further research could provide valuable insights. In addition, the effectiveness of internal communication cannot be determined without the employee perspective. In future research, this viewpoint could play a valuable role in understanding how strategic internal communication is experienced. Finally, this study only lays the foundation for the elements of internal communication that need to be considered for it to function strategically in INGOs. More research is needed on the process of strategic internal communication and how it impacts organisational communications. By strengthening the research in this area, there will be further clarity on the role of internal communication which, in turn, can impact on the practice of internal communication within organisations.

8.7 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the last two decades, civil society, NGOs and INGOs have become more integrated into the social fabric of society around the world. They provide a wide array of vital



services. As governance and power take on increasingly global aspects, INGOs, as the vehicles through which the voices of the poor, the vulnerable and the local can reach the global stage, are ever more important. As a result, their functioning and their management require increased focus.

INGOs face a variety of unique challenges as a result of the context in which they operate and the characteristics of their form, including the importance of values. There is a need to look beyond traditional management techniques developed for for-profit organisations to identify management practices that can help these organisations meet these challenges.

Postmodern strategic management and strategic internal communication in particular have the potential to fill this need. Through an emphasis on dialogue and negotiation, strategic internal communication can build cohesion, can build support for core values and can build flexibility and adaptability into INGOs. By addressing INGO challenges and negotiating a shared strategic intent, strategic internal communication can help INGOs achieve the change they want to see in the world both internally and externally.