Strategies for Preventing Conflicts within Disability Organisations Arising from the Application of the Principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us' in Lusaka District.

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ABSTRACT

Disabled people's organisations (DPOs) are the principal vehicles through which the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us' is translated into practice, yet the application of that principle can itself generate disagreement within and between organisations. This study explored stakeholders' perspectives, drawn from the managers of DPOs, on strategies for preventing conflicts within disability organisations arising from the application of the principle in Lusaka district, Zambia. The study was located within an interpretivist paradigm and adopted a qualitative approach with a case study design. Six DPO managers were purposively selected to represent different impairment constituencies, and the sample size was justified by the principle of information power and confirmed by code saturation, assessed against an explicit stopping rule. Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Five themes were constructed: (1) contested meanings of the principle as the principal source of internal conflict; (2) clarifying roles and codifying the principle in governance instruments; (3) inclusive, rotational and accountable leadership; (4) dialogue, early-warning and mediation mechanisms; and (5) capacity strengthening and coordinated partnerships. Participants did not regard conflict as an aberration to be suppressed, but as a predictable consequence of a principle that is interpreted differently by different constituencies, and they described prevention as a matter of making the principle explicit, procedural and shared. The study concludes that conflict prevention in DPOs depends less on invoking the principle than on institutionalising it through written rules, plural and accountable leadership, and trusted channels for dialogue. Recommendations are offered for DPOs, the Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities, government ministries and development partners.

Keywords: Conflict prevention; disabled people's organisations; leadership; Nothing About Us Without Us; participation; disability rights; Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

The participation of persons with disabilities in decisions that affect their lives is now a settled normative expectation in international human rights law. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) requires States Parties to consult closely with, and actively involve, persons with disabilities through their representative organisations in the development and implementation of legislation and policies (United Nations, 2006, Art. 4(3)), to promote their participation in public and political life (Art. 29), and to involve them fully in monitoring (Art. 33(3)). In General Comment No. 7, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2018) elaborated that representative organisations are those led, directed and governed by persons with disabilities, and distinguished them from other civil society organisations that work for, but are not governed by, persons with disabilities. Participation, in this account, is not satisfied by consultation alone; it is a question of who holds voice, authority and control.

The normative core of this expectation is captured in the slogan 'Nothing About Us Without Us', which Charlton (1998) traces through the global disability movement as a claim to self-determination and a rejection of paternalism. The slogan draws intellectual support from the social model of disability, which locates

disablement in social barriers and relations of oppression rather than in individual impairment (Oliver, 1990), and therefore treats control by disabled people over the institutions that speak for them as a matter of justice rather than courtesy. Disabled people's organisations (DPOs) are the principal institutional form through which the claim is pursued, and the World Health Organization (2022) likewise identifies meaningful engagement with such organisations as central to advancing health equity for persons with disabilities.

Zambia has built a substantial legal and policy architecture around these commitments. The country ratified the CRPD in 2010, enacted the Persons with Disabilities Act No. 6 of 2012 (Republic of Zambia, 2012), which established the Zambia Agency for Persons with Disabilities (ZAPD), and in 2025 adopted a revised National Policy on Persons with Disabilities (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, 2025). The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities commended the legislative progress when it reviewed Zambia in March 2024, while raising questions about implementation (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2024). The 2025 policy was itself prepared through consultations led by persons with disabilities and their organisations, yet it acknowledges that persons with disabilities continue to have fewer opportunities for self-representation in decision-making (Ministry of Community Development and Social Services, 2025). Empirical studies point in the same direction. Pilke and Waliyua (2023) found that negative attitudes towards the capabilities of persons with different impairments remained the principal obstacle to political participation in the 2021 general elections, and Seketi et al. (2024) concluded that the COVID-19 response in Zambia was largely unresponsive to the needs of people with disabilities. Participation, in other words, remains incomplete at the level of the state and the community.

A less examined problem lies within the disability movement itself. The principle that is meant to unify organisations can also divide them, because it admits of more than one reading. Mwape (2022), in a mixed-methods study of selected disability organisations in Lusaka and Copperbelt provinces, found that stakeholders interpreted the slogan in divergent ways, from a commitment to self-representation to a requirement that persons with disabilities must lead organisational management, and that more effective use of the slogan was characterised by moderately large conflicts among disabled people themselves. Related African scholarship indicates that the difficulty is not peculiar to Zambia. King et al. (2023) showed that women activists with disabilities in Tanzania, Ghana and Kenya conceive leadership as service and collective action, and Kuparinen (2024) reported that women leaders with disabilities in African organisations of persons with disabilities contend with patriarchal structures, organisational shortcomings and ableism that can be reproduced within the organisations themselves. Shakespeare (2014) has similarly cautioned that disability politics must contend with the diversity of impairment experience, and that claims to authentic representation may obscure differences within the constituency.

The management literature supplies a complementary insight. Rahim (2023) distinguishes substantive conflict, which concerns tasks, policies and resources, from affective conflict, which concerns relationships and identity, and argues that the aim of organisational leadership is not the elimination of conflict but its constructive management so that learning is preserved and damage is avoided. Where a principle such as 'Nothing About Us Without Us' is simultaneously a policy position (who should decide) and an identity claim (who belongs), substantive and affective conflict are likely to coincide, which makes prevention especially demanding. Despite this, little qualitative research has examined how the managers who run DPOs themselves understand and seek to prevent conflicts that arise from applying the principle. Existing work tends either to treat participation as a relationship between DPOs and the state, or to report conflict as a finding rather than to examine the preventive strategies available to organisational leaders. This article addresses that gap by centring the perspectives of DPO managers in Lusaka district, the capital district and the base of many national disability organisations and of the head office of ZAPD.

Objective of the Study

This article addresses a single objective: to explore stakeholders' perspectives on strategies for preventing conflicts within disability organisations arising from the application of the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us' in Lusaka district.

Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored in two complementary bodies of theory: Participatory Leadership Theory, operationalised through Arnstein's (1969) typology of participation, and Conflict Transformation Theory (Lederach, 2003). The first explains what the principle demands of leaders; the second explains how conflicts that arise in its application can be prevented and constructively reshaped.

Participatory Leadership Theory

Participatory leadership theory holds that leadership is exercised legitimately when those affected by decisions share in making them, and that the quality of participation varies from the symbolic to the substantive. Arnstein's (1969) ladder distinguishes non-participation, tokenism (informing, consulting and placating) and degrees of citizen power (partnership, delegated power and citizen control). Although developed in the context of urban planning, the ladder offers a precise vocabulary for the claim embedded in 'Nothing About Us Without Us', which is a claim to the upper rungs rather than to consultation alone.

Conflict Transformation Theory

Conflict Transformation Theory treats conflict as a normal and potentially productive feature of social relationships, and directs attention to the structures, relationships and patterns of communication that generate recurrent disputes rather than to the settlement of single episodes (Lederach, 2003). Its emphasis on prevention through changed relationships and institutional arrangements, rather than through the suppression of disagreement, was directly relevant to an inquiry into how DPO managers anticipate and defuse disputes before they escalate.

Integration of the Two Theories

Read together, the two theories supplied the interpretive axis for the findings. Participatory leadership theory clarified the content of the principle and the sources of disagreement about it, while Conflict Transformation Theory clarified the preventive logic of the strategies that participants described.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm, Approach and Design

The study was located within an interpretivist paradigm, which rests on a relativist ontology that treats organisational reality, including the meaning of a principle such as 'Nothing About Us Without Us', as socially constructed, and on a subjectivist epistemology in which knowledge is co-constructed through the interaction of researcher and participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A qualitative approach was adopted, with a case study design. A case study permits an in-depth, contextually grounded investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life setting, particularly where the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear (Yin, 2018). The case was defined as the application of the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us' within DPOs operating in Lusaka district, and each participating organisation represented an embedded unit of analysis, so that practices could be examined within organisations and patterns examined across them.

Study Setting, Population and Sampling

The study was conducted in Lusaka district, Zambia, between February and March, 2026. Lusaka district was selected because it hosts the head offices of many national disability organisations and the regulatory institutions with which they interact, and therefore offers an information-rich setting. The population of interest comprised managers of DPOs registered with ZAPD and operating in the district. Managers were selected because they occupy the position at which governance principles, member expectations and partner demands converge, and because they carry day-to-day responsibility for handling disputes.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, using maximum-variation logic to include managers of organisations representing different impairment constituencies and organisational forms. The inclusion criteria were: (a) holding a managerial or executive position in a DPO registered in Lusaka district; (b) a minimum of two years in that role; and (c) willingness to give informed consent. Six managers participated. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of all DPOs in Zambia; consistent with the interpretivist orientation, the aim was analytic depth and transferability of insight rather than empirical generalisation.

Sample Size and the Rule of Data Saturation

The size of the sample was determined on two complementary bases. The first was information power (Malterud et al., 2016). The required sample size in a qualitative study decreases as the study aim becomes narrower, the sample specificity becomes denser, the analysis is anchored in established theory, the dialogue between researcher and participant is of high quality, and the analysis is case-oriented rather than cross-case exhaustive. All five conditions favoured a small sample here: the objective was narrowly specified; the participants shared a specific role and context; the study was framed by two explicit theories; the semi-structured interviews were conducted by researchers familiar with the disability sector; and the analysis was bounded within a single case.

The second basis was data saturation. Saturation is the point at which further data collection yields little or no new information relevant to the research question. Hennink et al. (2017) distinguish code saturation, the point at which no new issues are identified, from meaning saturation, the point at which those issues are fully understood, and found that code saturation was reached within nine interviews while meaning saturation required sixteen to twenty-four. A later systematic review found that saturation is typically reached within a narrow range of interviews in focused studies of relatively homogeneous samples, but varies with the heterogeneity of the population and the complexity of the question (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). Guest et al. (2006) similarly found that most codes were identified within the first six interviews of a relatively homogeneous sample. These findings suggest that six interviews can be defensible for a focused objective and a homogeneous sample of managers, provided that saturation is demonstrated rather than assumed.

Saturation was therefore operationalised using the stopping-rule approach proposed by Guest et al. (2020). The first three interviews formed the base set from which an initial codebook was developed; a ‘run’ of the three subsequent interviews was then examined for new codes; and recruitment was to cease when the run produced no more than five per cent additional codes relative to the base set. As Table 1 shows, the base set yielded 39 codes and the following run of three interviews added one code (2.6 per cent), which satisfied the stopping rule. The sixth interview added no new codes and served to test the emerging themes for disconfirming accounts, a check on meaning saturation in the sense of Hennink et al. (2017).

The study also takes seriously Braun and Clarke’s (2021) caution that saturation is an uneasy fit with reflexive thematic analysis, in which themes are actively constructed by the analyst rather than found in the data.

Table 1. Saturation matrix: new codes generated per interview (n = 6)

Interview	New codes	Cumulative codes	Stage in stopping rule
1	22	22	Base set
2	12	34	Base set
3	5	39	Base set (39 codes)
4	1	40	Run (1 new code = 2.6% of base)
5	0	40	Run
6	0	40	Run; disconfirming-case check

Source: Fieldwork data; stopping rule adapted from Guest et al. (2020).

Data Collection

Data were generated through individual semi-structured interviews guided by an interview schedule developed from the study objective and the theoretical framework. The schedule covered participants' understanding of the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us'; the forms of conflict they had observed or managed in applying it; the measures that had prevented or aggravated such conflict; and the roles of members, boards, government and development partners. Interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and were conducted in English, with Nyanja or Bemba used where participants preferred. Consistent with the principle under study, reasonable accommodations were offered, including accessible venues and sign-language interpretation and alternative-format consent materials where requested. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim; where recording was declined, contemporaneous notes were taken.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022), proceeding through familiarisation with the data, the generation of initial codes, the construction of candidate themes, the review of themes against the full dataset, the definition and naming of themes, and the writing-up of the analysis. Coding was inductive but interpreted in dialogue with the two theories set out in Section 1.2. Five themes were constructed, and these organise the presentation of results in Section 3. Participants are identified by the codes M1 to M6 (manager 1 to manager 6).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was pursued through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was supported by the use of verbatim extracts and by returning transcript summaries to participants for confirmation or correction. Transferability is supported by thick description of the setting and participants, which allows readers to judge the applicability of the findings to comparable contexts. Dependability and confirmability were pursued through an audit trail of recordings, transcripts, the codebook and analytic memoranda, and through peer debriefing among the authors.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Africa Research University Research Ethics Committee and participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and participants were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty. Because the study concerned conflict within identifiable organisations in a small sector, particular care was taken over confidentiality: participants are identified only by the codes M1 to M6, organisations are not named, and details that could identify an organisation or a dispute have been omitted or generalised. Recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected files accessible only to the research team.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Consistent with the study objective, the results are organised around five themes constructed from the interviews: contested meanings of the principle as the principal source of conflict; clarifying roles and codifying the principle; inclusive, rotational and accountable leadership; dialogue, early-warning and mediation mechanisms; and capacity strengthening and coordinated partnerships. The profile of participants is summarised in Table 2 and the structure of the analysis in Table 3.

Profile of Participants

Six DPO managers participated. Their anonymised profiles are presented in Table 2. Organisational types are reported at a level of generality that protects confidentiality.

Table 2. Profile of participating DPO managers (n = 6)

Code	Type of organisation	Position held	Years in managerial role
M1	National association, physical disability	Executive Director	3
M2	National association, visual impairment	Programmes Manager	5
M3	Association of Deaf persons	Executive Director	6
M4	Organisation of women with disabilities	National Coordinator	3
M5	Parent-led organisation, intellectual disability	Chief Executive Officer	4
M6	Organisation of persons with albinism	Executive Director	3

Source: Fieldwork data.

Table 3. Summary of themes, analytic content and contributing participants

Theme	Analytic content	Participants
1. Contested meanings of the principle	Divergent readings of 'with us' (consultation, representation, leadership); the question of who counts as 'us'; the principle used as a shield against scrutiny	M1, M2, M3, M4, M5, M6
2. Clarifying roles and codifying the principle	Writing the principle into constitutions, role descriptions and partnership agreements; delimiting the mandates of DPOs, government and partners	M1, M2, M3, M5, M6
3. Inclusive, rotational and accountable leadership	Term limits, transparent elections, reserved positions for under-represented groups, open reporting of finances	M1, M2, M4, M5, M6
4. Dialogue, early-warning and mediation	Grievance channels, pre-hearing consultation, peer and neutral mediation, preference for internal resolution	M1, M3, M4, M5, M6
5. Capacity strengthening and coordinated partnerships	Conflict-management and governance training for executives; joint planning with government and donors; equitable resource-sharing	M2, M3, M4, M5, M6

Source: Fieldwork data.

Theme 1: Contested Meanings of the Principle as the Principal Source of Conflict

The first theme concerned the origins of conflict. Participants did not locate the problem in the principle itself, which all of them endorsed, but in the plurality of meanings attached to it. Three readings recurred: that the principle requires consultation of persons with disabilities; that it requires representation of their views by organisations in which they hold a majority; and that it requires that persons with disabilities themselves occupy every leadership position. Conflict arose when proponents of different readings met in the same board, membership meeting or partnership.

"For some members, the slogan means that only a person with a disability should ever sit in the chair. For others it simply means that we must be consulted. When these two understandings meet in one boardroom, you can feel the tension before anyone speaks." (M2)

"Parents speak for children with intellectual disabilities because the children cannot always speak in the meeting. But some leaders with physical disabilities say, 'This is our space.' Both sides believe they are protecting the principle." (M5)

A second dimension was the boundary of 'us'. Participants described disagreement about whether parents, guardians, siblings and professionals who work with persons with disabilities may speak and vote as part of the constituency, and about whether some impairment groups command more voice than others. Several observed that the principle was occasionally invoked instrumentally, to close down scrutiny.

"Sometimes the slogan is used as a shield. When someone does not want to be questioned about money, they say, 'You are not one of us, you do not understand.'" (M4)

These accounts are consistent with Mwape's (2022) finding that stakeholders in Zambian disability organisations read the slogan in divergent ways, ranging from self-representation to leadership of organisational management, and that conflict was most marked among disabled people themselves. Read through Arnstein's (1969) typology, managers were in effect describing a disagreement about which rung of the ladder the principle commands, and whether consultation, partnership or control satisfies it.

Theme 2: Clarifying Roles and Codifying the Principle in Governance Instruments

The second theme comprised the strategy most frequently described as preventive: making the meaning of the principle explicit in writing before disputes arise. Participants described revising constitutions, role descriptions and partnership agreements to specify what 'with us' requires in each setting: who nominates, who votes, who may be co-opted as an adviser without voting rights, and which decisions belong to members rather than to staff.

"We went back to our constitution and wrote down what 'with us' means in practice: who nominates, who votes, who may be co-opted as an adviser. Once it was on paper, the arguments reduced, because people were no longer arguing about the slogan, they were reading a clause." (M1)

"Every partner must know their lane. Government can consult us, but it cannot choose our representatives. And we must also know that we cannot take over what the Agency is mandated to do. When those lines are not clear, people start accusing each other of undermining the principle." (M3)

"Every year we sit with our partners and review the memorandum of understanding, so that nobody is surprised about who does what." (M6)

This strategy translates the principle from a slogan into a procedure. It also responds directly to the problem identified in Theme 1: where the meaning of the principle is contested, a written, jointly adopted definition substitutes a shared rule for competing interpretations. The emphasis on delimiting the mandates of DPOs and public institutions resonates with the confusion over the respective roles of government disability agencies and DPOs that Mwape (2022) identified as undermining service delivery, and with the division of responsibilities set out in the Persons with Disabilities Act, under which ZAPD registers and coordinates disability organisations (Republic of Zambia, 2012; OHCHR, 2024).

Theme 3: Inclusive, Rotational and Accountable Leadership

The third theme concerned the internal application of the principle to the organisation's own leadership. Participants noted that disagreement frequently arose when members came to perceive that the principle, which the organisation demands of others, was not being honoured in its own governance. Long-serving leaders, closed elections and opaque finances were repeatedly described as conditions in which the slogan was turned inward.

"We have term limits now. Before, one person stayed for twelve years, and the members began to say 'nothing about us without us' to the leadership itself. That is when the real conflict started." (M2)

"We reserved positions for women and for members with hearing and visual impairments so that the executive is not made up of one impairment group only. Before, the loudest group always won." (M4)

"When the accounts are presented openly at the annual general meeting, the rumours stop. Most conflicts about money are really conflicts about not knowing." (M6)

Participants thus treated rotation, plural representation and transparent reporting as preventive measures, not merely as good governance. The inward application of the slogan is analytically significant: it shows that members hold leaders to the standard of participation that the organisation advocates externally, and that a failure to meet that standard generates conflict that is both substantive (about procedures) and affective (about trust). In Arnstein's (1969) terms, an organisation that claims the upper rungs in its advocacy but exercises the lower rungs in its own governance invites the charge of tokenism. The concern for plural representation is consistent with the evidence that women with disabilities often face compounded barriers to leadership in African DPOs, including patriarchal structures and ableist attitudes that may be reproduced within organisations (Kuparinen, 2024; King et al., 2023), and with Shakespeare's (2014) emphasis on the diversity of impairment experience. King et al. (2023) further report that women activists conceive leadership as service and collective action, a conception that sits comfortably with the rotational and accountable arrangements participants described.

Theme 4: Dialogue, Early-Warning and Mediation Mechanisms

The fourth theme concerned how organisations detect and defuse disagreements before they harden. Participants described a preference for resolving disputes internally and early, through structured conversation, and distinguished this from formal grievance or legal procedures, which they regarded as a last resort likely to damage relationships and public standing.

"We do not wait for a dispute to reach the courts or the Agency. We call the parties, listen to each one separately, then bring them together. The elders in the movement help, because people respect them." (M5)

"We have a suggestion box and a WhatsApp group for members, so that small grievances reach us early. A small grievance is easy to solve. A grievance that has been left for a year has become a faction." (M3)

"Sometimes we need a neutral person, someone from another organisation, to chair the meeting, because whoever is inside the quarrel cannot be fair." (M1)

These mechanisms correspond closely with the preventive logic of Conflict Transformation Theory, which emphasises relationship-building, accessible channels of communication and the early surfacing of grievances (Lederach, 2003). They also reflect Rahim's (2023) argument that constructive management of conflict depends on integrating the perspectives of the parties, rather than on avoidance or domination. For conflict prevention in DPOs, accessibility of communication is therefore not an ancillary matter but a condition of early warning: grievances that cannot be voiced in an accessible format cannot be heard before they escalate.

Theme 5: Capacity Strengthening and Coordinated Partnerships

The fifth theme concerned the skills and external relationships that sustain the preceding strategies. Participants observed that many DPO managers had risen to their positions as effective advocates rather than as trained managers, and that conflict-handling skills were therefore unevenly distributed. They also described the funding environment as a recurring source of disagreement, particularly where resources were directed to some constituencies and not others.

"Most of us became managers because we were good advocates, not because we trained in management. Training in conflict handling and governance should be offered to every new executive after elections." (M4)

"Donors can create conflict when they fund one group and not another. We ask for joint planning so that resources are shared fairly and people can see how decisions were made." (M2)

"When the ministry and the Agency and our organisations plan together, the argument about who represents whom becomes smaller, because everyone sees the same plan." (M5)

The emphasis on capacity echoes the recommendation of Scherer et al. (2025) that funding and capacity-building for disability-focused organisations be increased and that government collaborate genuinely with them. Participants' account of donor-induced rivalry resonates with Kett et al. (2019), who found that unequal power in partnerships can relegate partners to subordinate roles and that transformative collaboration requires engagement with the political dimensions of inclusion.

Synthesis: A Conflict-Prevention Framework for DPOs

Taken together, the five themes describe a logic of prevention that runs from diagnosis to institutional response. Theme 1 identifies the generative condition, namely the plurality of readings of the principle; Themes 2 to 5 identify strategies that address, respectively, the definitional, leadership, relational and capacity dimensions of that condition. Table 4 summarises the relationship between the conflict triggers described by participants and the preventive strategies they proposed, together with the theoretical mechanism through which each is understood to operate.

Table 4. Conflict triggers, preventive strategies and theoretical mechanisms

Conflict trigger	Preventive strategy	Mechanism
Competing readings of 'with us' (consultation, representation, leadership)	Codify the meaning of the principle in constitutions, role descriptions and agreements	Replaces competing interpretations with a shared rule (Lederach, 2003)
Ambiguous mandates of DPOs, government and partners	Written partnership agreements; periodic joint review	Clarifies roles and expectations (Arnstein, 1969)
Entrenched leadership; narrow representation; opaque finances	Term limits; reserved positions; transparent reporting at general meetings	Aligns internal governance with the participation claimed externally
Unvoiced or late-voiced grievances	Accessible grievance channels; pre-hearing consultation; neutral and peer mediation	Early warning and constructive management (Rahim, 2023)
Skills gaps; donor-induced rivalry	Governance and conflict-management training; joint planning with donors and government	Alters the relational structure of competition (Lederach, 2003)

Source: Authors' synthesis of fieldwork data.

Two features of this framework merit emphasis. First, participants consistently framed prevention as the institutionalisation of participation, not as the containment of disagreement. This distinguishes the approach from conflict avoidance and aligns it with the view that constructive conflict is a source of learning (Rahim, 2023). Second, the framework treats the principle as something to be operationalised through organisational routines. The implication is that invoking 'Nothing About Us Without Us' is necessary but insufficient: the principle prevents conflict only when it is accompanied by rules that specify what it requires, leaders who are answerable to the members whose voice it protects, and channels through which disagreement can be expressed safely. This is consistent with the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities' (2018) insistence that meaningful participation requires organisations that are genuinely led and governed by persons with disabilities and that are themselves supported to function effectively.

Limitations of the Study

The results should be interpreted in light of the scope of the sample. First, the study relied on the accounts of six DPO managers and therefore captures the perspectives of those who hold managerial authority rather than of members, board officers, volunteers, government officers or development partners, each of whom may understand the principle and its conflicts differently. Managers describing their own organisations may emphasise constructive practice. The term 'stakeholders' in the study objective is accordingly operationalised here through the managers' perspectives; triangulation with other stakeholder groups remains for future research.

Second, the sample size, while justified by information power and demonstrated through an explicit saturation rule, is small. Saturation is a judgement of sufficiency for a specific objective and not a guarantee that no further perspective exists (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and the sample was drawn from a single district and a narrow range of organisations. The findings are therefore offered as analytically transferable insights, not as statistical generalisations to all DPOs in Zambia. Finally, interview accounts cannot independently establish the effectiveness of the strategies described, which would need to be examined through longitudinal, documentary or observational evidence.

CONCLUSION

This study explored stakeholders' perspectives, drawn from DPO managers, on strategies for preventing conflicts within disability organisations arising from the application of the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us' in Lusaka district. The results show that conflict in this setting is rooted less in disagreement about the principle than in disagreement about its meaning: what 'with us' requires, who counts as 'us', and who is entitled to lead. Participants described a coherent set of preventive strategies, namely codifying the principle and clarifying roles, practising inclusive, rotational and accountable leadership, establishing accessible early-warning and mediation mechanisms, and strengthening capacity and coordinated partnerships.

The study contributes by shifting attention from the relationship between DPOs and the state to the internal leadership dynamics through which the principle is lived. Read through the two theories, the strategies described by participants alter both who holds voice and authority and how disagreement is handled, which is the combination that the theories identify as necessary for durable prevention.

Recommendations

First, DPOs should review their constitutions, role descriptions and partnership agreements to state expressly what the principle 'Nothing About Us Without Us' requires in their governance, including eligibility to vote and hold office, the status of parents, guardians and allies, and the decision-making authority of members and staff.

Second, DPOs should adopt term limits, transparent election procedures, reserved positions for under-represented constituencies, and routine open reporting of finances at general meetings, so that internal governance conforms to the standard of participation the organisation advocates externally.

Third, DPOs, ideally through their umbrella structures, should establish accessible grievance channels and mediation arrangements that include trained peer mediators and neutral chairs, and should offer governance and conflict-management training to executives following each election cycle.

Fourth, ZAPD, the Ministry of Community Development and Social Services and development partners should clarify mandates in writing, plan jointly with DPOs, distribute funding by transparent and equitable criteria, and support the capacity of organisations of persons with disabilities in line with General Comment No. 7 and the 2025 National Policy.

Fifth, further research should examine the perspectives of members, board officers, government officers and development partners, extend the inquiry to other districts and to constituencies not represented here, and evaluate over time whether the strategies described reduce the incidence and severity of conflict.

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Competing Interests

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Authors' Contributions

[Author 1] designed the study, developed the protocol, conducted the fieldwork, performed the analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. [Author 2] and [Author 3] supervised the study, reviewed the analysis and revised the manuscript for intellectual content. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Consent

All authors declare that informed consent was obtained from all participants for participation in the study and for the publication of anonymised verbatim extracts. Copies of the consent documentation are available for review by the Editorial Office of this journal.

Ethical Approval

The study received ethical clearance from the Africa Research University Research Ethics Committee. The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical standards and procedures approved by the committee.

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