

Exploring the field of NGO cooperation in Lebanon: Snapshot from the field

Explorer le champ de la coopération entre ONG au Liban : un aperçu du terrain

Explorando el campo de la cooperación entre ONG en el Líbano: una visión general del terreno

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Article abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon face survival challenges that require them to cooperate. With many attempts falling short of their goals, this paper studied dysfunctions in NGO cooperation. An intervention-research methodology was adopted to accompany fifteen active organizations in framing cooperation dysfunctions and developing solutions. We identified major interorganizational dysfunctions grouped under strategy, decision-making, procedures, and language axes. The researchers then accompanied organizations in collective solution provision to improve their cooperation. Theoretical implications point towards a moderated relationship between intra and interorganizational improvements, and that interorganizational dysfunctions transfer into interorganizational cooperation level.

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Lebanon face survival challenges that require them to cooperate. With many attempts falling short of their goals, this paper studied dysfunctions in NGO cooperation. An intervention-research methodology was adopted to accompany fifteen active organizations in framing cooperation dysfunctions and developing solutions. We identified major interorganizational dysfunctions grouped under strategy, decision-making, procedures, and language axes. The researchers then accompanied organizations in collective solution provision to improve their cooperation. Theoretical implications point towards a moderated relationship between intra and interorganizational improvements, and that interorganizational dysfunctions transfer into interorganizational cooperation level.

Keywords: Non-governmental organization, NGO, Cooperation, Socio-economic approach to Management, Intervention research

Résumé

Les organisations non gouvernementales (ONG) du Liban sont confrontées à des défis de survie qui les obligent à coopérer. Cet article explore les dysfonctionnements qui ont empêché plusieurs tentatives de coopération entre ONG d'atteindre leurs objectifs. Une méthode de recherche-intervention a été adoptée pour accompagner quinze organisations dans l'identification des dysfonctionnements de coopération et l'élaboration de solutions. Nous avons identifié des dysfonctionnements inter-organisationnels majeurs regroupés sous les axes stratégie, prise de décision, procédures et langage. Les chercheurs ont ensuite accompagné les organisations dans la conception collective de solutions pour améliorer leur coopération. Les résultats pointent une relation modérée entre les améliorations intra et inter-organisationnelles, et un transfert direct des dysfonctionnements intra-organisationnels omniprésents vers le niveau de la coopération inter-organisationnelle.

Mots-clés : Organisation non-gouvernementale, ONG, Coopération, théorie socio-économique du management, Recherche-intervention

Resumen

Las organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONG) del Líbano se enfrentan a retos de supervivencia que les obligan a cooperar. Este artículo explora los disfuncionamientos que han impedido que varios intentos de cooperación entre ONG alcancen sus objetivos. Se adoptó un método de investigación-intervención para ayudar a quince organizaciones a identificar disfuncionamientos en la cooperación y desarrollar soluciones. Se identificaron los principales disfuncionamientos interorganizacionales agrupados bajo los epígrafes de estrategia, toma de decisiones, procedimientos y lenguaje. A continuación, los investigadores ayudaron a las organizaciones a idear colectivamente soluciones para mejorar su cooperación. Los resultados apuntan a una relación moderada entre las mejoras intra e interorganizacionales, y a una transferencia directa de los disfuncionamientos interorganizacionales dominantes al nivel de cooperación interorganizacional.

Palabras clave: Organización no gubernamental, ONG, Cooperación, Teoría socioeconómica de la gestión, Investigación-intervención



The sector of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is steadily growing in the Middle East and particularly in Lebanon. Demographic growth and spatial expansion are appended with societal impact. NGOs are capable of rallying communities around social, environmental, economic, humanitarian, cultural, political, and identity themes. However, they are confronted with expanding societal needs, resource scarcity, and rapidly shifting donor priorities that jeopardize their existence (AbouAssi and Tschirhart, 2018). Most importantly, NGOs encounter the challenge of fragmentation, and consequently, credibility and legitimacy towards purveyors of funds and the public in general (Lamin and Zaheer, 2012). Oxford dictionary defined fragmentation in society as parting into a collection of separate interest groups. Fragmentation is commendable for being a source of diversity, propinquity and access, democratization, and effectiveness. Yet it entrains the threat of inefficiency and conflict. The latter comes from differences in fundamental values, excessive competition for funds, rivalry to advance priorities among stakeholders, and the lack of inclusivity in cooperative endeavors. Nonetheless, self-interest may be perceived as an incentive to cooperation (Gray, 1989). NGOs gain strength when they “are linked together in ways that promote collective goals, cross-society coalitions, mutual accountability, and shared action learning” (Edwards, 2014: 29). Therefore, articulating civil society action, through cooperation, is perceived as a foundation for a stable community (Cohen and Arato, 1992).

Research has shown that NGOs need each other disregarding the size of the organizations (Hardy, Phillips, and Lawrence, 2003; Syal, van Wessel, and Sahoo, 2021). Cooperation is not the natural state of affairs in the organizational world. It is a process of social construction (McGuire, 1988) that needs higher levels of intra-organizational skills, tools for joint planning and decision-making, and behavioral controls (Moshtari and Gonçalves, 2017; Verschuere and De Corte, 2015; Wiepking and Heijnen, 2011). Successful examples are rare, particularly among non-governmental organizations; failed attempts are less well-known than successful ones (Abdy and Barclay, 2001). Nonetheless, the ubiquitous and chaotic changes, symptomatic of the modern world, draw NGOs together to advance their interests (Gray, 1989). Cooperation is usually driven by contextual factors, interorganizational factors, or intra-organizational factors (Moshtari and Gonçalves, 2017). NGOs may cooperate to improve their institutional legitimacy when subject to institutional pressures or to affirm their standing and strategic positions in their fields (Sowa, 2009; Zeimers, Anagnostopoulos, Zintz, and Willem, 2019). Changing donor priorities, for example, and unstable international aid to developing economies drive NGOs to cooperate to divert the dependency and power asymmetries vis-à-vis donor agencies (Appel, 2018). However, many cooperation attempts fail due to dysfunctional implementation, unsound logic, organizational misfit between partners, divergence in problem definition, direction-setting, and values, the failure to acknowledge interdependence, or due to defective structuring (Abdy and Barclay, 2001; Zeimers *et al.*, 2019; Gray, 1985).

Always fragile and time-consuming, cooperation may worsen relations between entities if managing differences is incongruent (Gray, 1989).

Cooperation among organizations remains ill-defined and few studies examined antecedents to the relationship between organizations particularly intra-organizational challenges (Castañer and Oliveira, 2020). This study looks beyond the all-too-common cultural and epistemic asymmetries that complicate cooperation (Moisander and Stenfors, 2009). The paper hence fills a gap in cooperation studies towards non-core areas (Vachon and Klassen, 2006) and into the intra-organizational antecedents of interorganizational cooperation. The specific interest of Lebanon is the lack of field studies in a country notorious for fragmentation across all levels of society (Messarra, 2013; Chamoun, 1998; Gates, 1989). This research investigates the impediments to NGO cooperation and the relationship between interorganizational cooperation and intra-organizational dysfunctions. The central hypothesis is thus:

Improving interorganizational cooperation reduces intra-organizational dysfunction and vice-versa.

The methodology adopted is one of intervention research that brings both a theoretical contribution and managerial recommendations (Buono & Savall, 2015; Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014; Savall & Zardet, 2011). The next paragraph looks at relevant theories, followed by the research design, field of intervention, findings, and a discussion to summarize.

Theoretical framework

Faithful to an inductive design, the delineation of the literature was guided by informal discussions with NGO managers who had experienced cooperation attempts. The recurring themes were the need to cooperate and the simultaneous focus on structure and behavior. Addressing these issues, the theoretical framework encompasses the evolution of cooperation, structuration theory, and the socio-economic theory.

The Evolution of cooperation

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) represent a managerial form of free associational life. They are mired in competition for visibility, recognition, and influence. However, competition is tamed by survival concerns. Augmenting needs, mercurial donor priorities, and resource scarcity warrant NGO cooperation (Edwards, 2014). The seminal paper by Axelrod and Hamilton (1981) shows that cooperation can be bred even in competitive environments. Rather than occurring naturally, cooperation oscillates continuously between competition and cooperation (Girard, 2015). The heterogeneity of worldviews and the misalignment of objectives conceivably create dilemmas. Cooperation is contingent on people's previous experiences, organizational strategies, and the congruence between

individual interests and group objectives (Dagnino, Le Roy, and Yami, 2007). More stable levels of cooperation emerge from partner choice in small groups that fit together and have better prospects in imposing their common will when communicating frequently (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981; Axelrod and Dion, 1988; Axelrod, 2006; stoker, 2006).

Key to cooperation is maintaining a balance among constituencies and reflecting the balance in the network’s mission, long-term goals and objectives, the adoption of courses of action, allocation of resources, and means of strategy control (Collin and Porras, 2005). The challenge remains to effectively institute cooperation as the social norm by legitimizing it through collective acceptance. The institution of cooperation is the process by which it acquires value and stability, forming and morphing along the regulative, normative, and cognitive pillars. The regulative pillar refers to rules and sanctions, the normative refers to the social dimension, and the cognitive introduces the socially construed personal dimension (Peters, 1999). Therefore, developing interorganizational cooperation requires attending to the structural aspects—procedural and regulative—as much as to the agency aspects—relational and cognitive. Structuration theory, addressed below, considers the structure and agency dyad.

The structuration of cooperation

There are colliding views on how structure affects behaviors in general (Gianetto and Heydari, 2015). The view focusing on structure runs the risk of hyperstability while focusing on change agents encounters the risk of unpredictability (Peters, 1999). However, structures are involved with individuals “in an ongoing process of interaction that produces change and even replacement” (Peters, 1999: 50). Structures are defined as sets of elements that exhibit properties of relative stability over time (Savall and Zardet, 2008, 2011). They are influenced by contingencies in the organization’s environment (Omoteso, Patel, and Scott, 2007). The processual concept of structuration brings together structure and agency to give them flow and continuity, and the possibility of structural change (Whittington, 2010). From a structural perspective, the properties of a system are both the medium and the outcome of the practices they recursively organize (Giddens, 1984). In other words, the structural properties are essential to action, at the same time as being produced and reproduced by this action (Whittington, 2010). From the agency perspective, cooperation could be understood through the hermeneutic character of human conduct in opposition to the mechanistic view of pure structure (Giddens, 1983).

Managing cooperation is hard because of social practices, the non-positivistic human conduct, and because everybody has some sort of social power (Giddens, 1984). Investigating the structural-behavioral relationships among NGOs leads invariably to investigating formative antecedents such as past cooperative experiences, but most notably the intra-organizational experience (Bachmann, 2001).

Socio-economic theory

In the same vein, the paradoxical view that structures are the result of individual actions, yet assuming that individuals are powerless against structure (Grafstein, 1992) is refuted by the socio-economic theory. The latter posits that organizational functioning is the result of the interaction between structures and behaviors (El Haddad, *et al.*, 2018). The focus of this research is to change the cooperative relation between NGOs operating in Lebanon which requires taming defensive routines, in turn requiring an empowerment paradigm, effective communication, and a concerted view (Khan, Bawani, and Aziz, 2013;

Wilkinson, 1998). The call for empowerment, effective communication, and concertation is intrinsic to the socio-economic theory (Savall, 1975, 1979, 2017). The theory asserts that conflict is a source of participation and critical thinking (Hutton and Liefoghe, 2011) and that domesticating the conflictive energy aligns individual and summative purposes (Argyris *et al.*, 1985). This requires tolerance for dissent and divergent ideas, and an empowerment paradigm involving everyone in everything (Wilkinson, 1998), in other words, inclusivity. Yet domesticating this energy and aligning it with the collective purpose, requires active deliberation and concerted rules (Savall, 2017). In this vein, the socio-economic theory overlaps with the basic assumptions of the structural-behavioral dyad of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), and the active communication and reciprocity carried by the evolution of cooperation (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981). The theory also stipulates ongoing negotiation and the contractualization of the organizational sphere to enfranchise the human. Henceforth, the importance of extensive participation of individual constituencies is a necessary condition to unbridle collective cooperation.

In sum, the literature on cooperation reveals salient concepts that intersect with three seminal theories. The concepts of concertation and contractualization are shared by the evolution of cooperation (Axelrod, 2006), structuration theory (Giddens, 1984), and the socio-economic theory (Savall, 1974, 2017). The concepts of empowerment and the duality of the structure and agency are common to structuration and the socio-economic theories. The latter exclusively develops the concept of dysfunctions and hidden costs (Savall and Zardet, 2008, 2011). Table 1 provides a summary of concepts and theories framing this research.

<div>TABLE 1</div> <div>Theoretical framework and concepts</div>			
Concepts Investigated: Interplay between NGO Cooperation and Intra-organizational Dysfunctions			
Concepts	Framework		
	Evolution of cooperation (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981; Axelrod, 2006)	Structuration theory (Giddens, 1984)	Socio-economic theory (Savall, 1975, 1979, 2017)
Concertation	Active Communication	Communication	Deliberation, Active Concertation, Collective Intelligence
Contractualization	Reciprocity/Reward and Retaliation Mechanisms	Exercise of Power and Sanctions	Tolerance for Divergence, Contractual/ Negotiation
Duality tensions		Duality of Structure and Agency	Interaction Between Structures and Behaviors
Empowerment		Individual Knowledge and Power	Human Potential, Inclusivity, Individual empowerment
Hidden costs			Dysfunctions and Hidden Costs

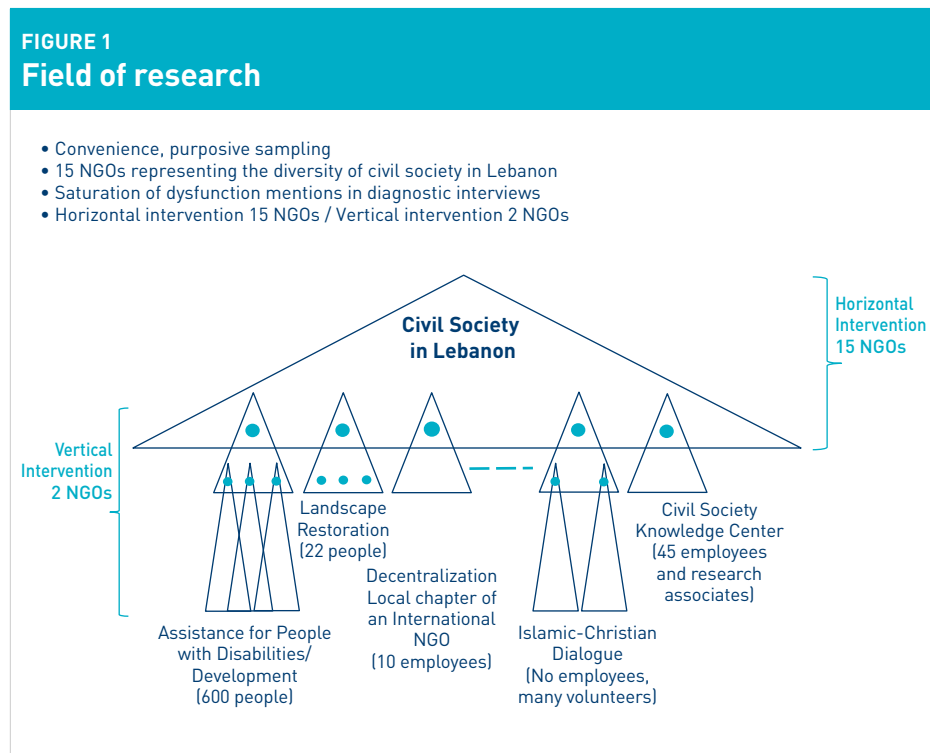
Research method

Intervention research is a longitudinal method characterized by direct interaction with actors in the field to transform the object of research and thus better understand it (Plane, 2000; Hatchuel and Laufer, 2000; Savall and Zardet, 2004). It followed two sequences. The first sequence was of exploratory nature with a sample of 15 NGOs called horizontal intervention. The second, called vertical intervention, was conducted within two NGOs to deepen the intra-organizational analysis. This allowed the identification of links between intra-organizational and interorganizational cooperation practices. The intervention lasted almost three years from September 2017 until June 2020

Horizontal intervention

The sample evolved with field work until reaching saturation (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The fifteen NGOs represent a diversity by activity type, size, age, location, and structural form. Figure 1 illustrates the field of research. For the sake of simplification, the figure shows five NGOs and a dotted line representing the others.

Table 2 describes the NGOs by field of action, formative experience, establishment year, size, geographical location, and the position of the interviewees.



Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used to collect quotes about dysfunctions in the cooperation among NGOs by asking a simple open-ended question: "What are the dysfunctions in cooperation among NGOs?". Twenty-nine persons were interviewed (see Table 2). Once saturation was reached, the quotes were coded following a codebook developed in more than 1600 cases of intervention research using the same open-ended question about dysfunctions (for details see Savall and Zardet, 2011; Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). The codebook contains 5600 entries hierarchized into six families of dysfunctions and their subfamilies (Table 3). The families are work conditions, work organization, communication-coordination-cooperation, time management, integrated training, and strategic implementation (Savall and Zardet, 2011).

To give an example of how coding was done, consider the following fieldnote quotes (see table 5 for source of quotes):

"An important dysfunction is the tie between the NGO & the president: the personification of the NGO; NGOs reflect the patriarchal society where they operate. Decision-making is hyper-centralized in one person & decision are taken at his/her discretion."

This quote was coded under the family *Strategic Implementation* and the sub-family of *Modes of Management*

"Training focused on one field only may cause the lack of knowledge in other matters that may be of help when it comes to cooperating with other NGOs."

Was coded under *Integrated Training* family of dysfunctions, the sub family of *Training-Job Adjustment*

"Rules and regulations are not always respected or applied, especially among the young generation who lacks experience."

This quote was coded under the family of *Work Organization*, the sub-family of *Regulations and Procedures*.

Data were then analyzed to identify emerging patterns summarized into themes. They were collectively validated in lengthy deliberations in group meetings with the ensemble of respondents, in order to generate a "mirror effect" (Savall & Zardet, 1987, Davoine, 2021). During these meetings, coded data was anonymized and presented to the group to reach meaning consensus. The emerging themes were prioritized following their frequency, convergence, and consequences.

In the next phases, the researchers led the respondents into a series of meetings to deliberate solutions to the dysfunctions revealed in the diagnosis phase (Buono and Savall, 2015; Savall and Zardet, 2011).

Vertical interventions

The same intervention research process was conducted within two NGOs. Called SPRING and RESTORE, they were the first among participating NGOs to accept hosting the vertical interventions. SPRING is a 600-employee NGO turned social enterprise working for people with disabilities. RESTORE is a fast-growing 22-employee NGO that started as a foreign-funded project working on landscape restoration (more details in table 2). After presenting the diagnoses, project groups were also formed in both NGOs to deliberate and propose solutions. The results of the process will be subject to another paper because the richness and amount of data cannot be exposed here.

TABLE 2
Interviewees, diagnostic interviews, interorganizational level

Identification of the organization	Formative Experience	Members	Location	Affiliation	Respondents (no. of respondents)
Assistance of people with disabilities turned social enterprise, SPRING	Five scout friends decide to help war injured, established 1985	600 employees, International & local volunteers	Decentralized, 27 centers, Headquarter in Beirut	National with Branches in France & US	Chief executive & head of center (2)
Landscape restoration, RESTORE	Project financed and managed by US government agencies, est. 2010	22 employees	Beirut office, Nation-wide outreach	National	Executive director, four program managers, Head of communication (6)
Decentralization	Local chapter of an international organization, est. 2016	6 employees	Beirut office, Nation-wide Outreach	International	Executive director, Head of communication, Head of program (3)
Islamic-Christian dialogue	Volunteers from institute of religious studies, est. 2012	Volunteers, project oriented	Housed in a Beirut university, Nation-wide outreach	National	General manager (volunteer), Two program managers (volunteers) (4)
Civil society knowledge center	Volunteer initiative online platform to coordinate aid during crises, est. 2006	12 employees	Beirut office, Nation-wide outreach	National	Executive director (1)
Inclusion of the differently abled	Volunteer initiative led by a mother of a differently abled kid, est. 2010	Volunteers	Beirut office, Nation-wide outreach	National	Founder director (1)
Women empowerment	Local initiative by women in a peripheral village, est. 2004	Volunteers	Peripheral rural area, Local outreach	National	C-founder (volunteer) (1)
Prison reform & drug rehabilitation	Volunteer initiative started by a veteran of prison reform and drug rehabilitation, est. 2018	Volunteers	Works from Beirut, National outreach	National	Co-founders (2)
Public space advocacy	Student initiative to connect through cultural activities, and life-skills workshops, est. 2003	6 employees	Beirut office, Nation-wide outreach	National	Founder executive director (1)
Medical assistance for underprivileged kids	Volunteer initiative by practicing heart surgeons to operate needy kids, est. 2005	Volunteers	Beirut office, Nation-wide outreach	National	Co-founder director (1)
Peacebuilding journalism	Initiative spun out of a workshop on journalism, est. 2013	2 employees	Office in urban area close to Beirut, Nation-wide outreach	National	Founder executive director (1)
Good governance advocacy	Alumni of US funded NGOs and grants, est. 2010	3 employees	Office in Beirut, National outreach	National	President (volunteer), Executive director, Project manager (3)
Corporate social responsibility advocacy	Local chapter of United Nations Global Compact, est. 2015	3 employees, 197 members	Housed in a Beirut university, Nation-wide outreach	International	Co-founder president (volunteer) (1)
Local development	Founded by an academic living in a rural area to help the ultra-conservative and underdeveloped communities, est. 1998	Undisclosed number of employees, upward of 200	Office in a peripheral city in a urban area, Local outreach	National	Founder executive director (1)
Environmental advocacy	Volunteer initiative to engage citizens in environmental issues, est. 2010	3 employees	Beirut office, Nation-wide outreach	National	President, Board member (volunteers) (2)

TABLE 3
Families and sub-families of dysfunctions (Savall and Zardet, 2011)

1 Work Conditions		
101	Layout and Arrangement of Premises	
102	Equipment and supplies	
103	Nuisance	
104	Physical conditions of work	
105	Physical workload	
106	Work hours	
107	Atmosphere at work	
2 Work Organization		
201	Distribution of tasks. Missions, functions	
202	Regulation of absenteeism	
203	Interest of the work	
204	Autonomy of the job	
205	Workload	
206	Rules and regulations	
207	Organization chart	
3 Cooperation-Coordination-Communication		
301	3C internal to the service	
302	Relationship to neighboring services	
303	3C between the network and the home office	
304	3C between the home office and branch offices	
305	3C at the board of directors' level	
306	3C between elected authorities and public servants	
307	3C frameworks	
308	Transmission of information	
309	Vertical 3C	
310	Horizontal 3C	
4 Time management		
401	Respecting deadlines	
402	Planning, scheduling of activities	
403	Poorly-assumed tasks	
404	Factors disturbing time management	
5 Integrated training		
501	Adequacy of training-Job	
502	Training needs	
503	Available competency	
504	Training frameworks	
505	Training and technical change	
6 Strategic implementation		
601	Strategic orientation	
602	Authors of the strategy	
603	Breaking down and organizing strategic implementation	
604	Tools of strategic implementation	
605	Information systems	
606	Means of strategic implementation	
607	Personnel management	
608	Mode of management	

Table 4 summarizes the number of interviews, dysfunctions, and themes resulting from the horizontal (interorganizational) and vertical (intra-organizational) interventions. After the presentation of the diagnoses results, project groups were formed in each NGO with the aim of proposing concerted solutions.

TABLE 4
Number of interviews, dysfunctions, and key ideas resulting from the inter and intra-organizational interventions

	Interorganizational 15 NGOs	Intra-organizational SPRING	Intra-organizational RESTORE
No. of interviews	29	11	14
No. of dysfunctions	369	165	151
Number of key ideas	76	73	82

Field findings

The results are consecutively disclosed hereinafter starting with a section on “Dysfunctions in NGO cooperation”, then the “Underlying reasons behind dysfunctional cooperation”, and “Courses of action to improve cooperation”. The sections describe the results ordered by three central themes as revealed by the research. The last section reports on an unexpected national movement led by NGOs that benefited the research.

Dysfunctions in NGO cooperation

The interviews collected 369 quotes whose content analysis pointed to 42.3% relating to Strategic Implementation, 17.9% Work Organization, 17.9% Cooperation-Communication-Coordination, 11.1% Integrated Training, 5.7% Time management, and 5.1% Work Organization. The average of 12 dysfunctions expressed per interview is within the average of intervention research cases (12 to 15). The results were discussed at length with the respondents and NGO experts. They are narrated with respondents' quotes to improve conclusion validity (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The quotes used in the narration below are in table 5 along with their source.

After the validation of the dysfunctions, three themes: **strategy and decision-making**, **procedural considerations** and what participants chose to call **common language** (in the sense of values, social manners, and the role and interactions with stakeholders) were selected.

Strategy and decision-making: There's (a) lack of clarity in strategic orientation of individual NGOs because their “*strategy is unclear, too dispersed, not inclusive, nor revised systematically*”, either because of “[*lack of*] *strategic anticipations and management control weakness*” or because (b) the “*lack of transparency towards partners about how decisions are taken internally and the degree of empowerment of NGO representatives*”. It is made more salient by “*the founders still wield[ing] decisive powers, despite their absence from executive positions*”, or the vague “*distribution of roles and decision-making: Blurred roles, focalized decision making, inadequacy of chart to organizational growth*”.

TABLE 5

List of fieldnote quotes used in the narration of findings and their source

Fieldnote quote	Source
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - an important dysfunction is the tie between the NGO & the president: the personification of the NGO; NGOs reflect the patriarchal society where they operate. Decision making is hyper-centralized in one person and decisions are taken at his/her discretion - apprehension from hidden political and confessional affiliations - personification of NGOs instead of seeking (d) institutionalization, and the high staff turnover that cause constant loss of competencies and hence [loss of] consistency in cooperation projects 	Civil society knowledge center
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [lack of] strategic anticipations and management control weakness - heavy procedures, duplication of procedures, challenged procedures, [end up as] unapplied procedures - lack of commitment to deadlines and meetings, especially when NGOs have low interest in a project, or lack of staff, or when the NGO is volunteer-based - requirements of donors that give primacy to procedures and visibility over effectiveness and efficiency 	Landscape restoration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - rules and regulations are not always respected or applied, especially among the young generation who lacks experience - [deficient] distribution of roles and decision-making: Blurred roles, focalized decision making, inadequacy of chart to organizational growth - procedures that organize information sharing, and the mode and frequency of communication are absent or inapplicable - cooperation procedures [that] are disregarded because they add to an overload of procedures 	Decentralization
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - training focused on one field only may cause the lack of knowledge in other matters that may be of help when it comes to cooperating with other NGOs - NGOs are competing for resources 	Prison reform & drug rehabilitation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - strategy is unclear, too dispersed, not inclusive, nor revised systematically - the founders still wield decisive powers, despite their absence from executive positions - [absence of procedures to assign] focal points in each NGO including regulating their absence 	Assistance of people with disabilities turned social enterprise
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - lack of transparency towards partners about how decisions are taken internally and the degree of empowerment of NGO representatives 	Environmental advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - competing time management priorities, and inadequacy or non-alignment of competency development 	Inclusion of the differently abled
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - non-adaptation of procedures to organizational functioning 	Good governance advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the strategic orientations of individual NGOs are not clear 	Corporate social responsibility advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the absence of specific concerted procedures leads to (c) "unequal visibility for all NGOs" 	Public space advocacy
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - differences in the reporting proficiency, competency levels, language used, and degrees of formality in interpersonal manners 	Local development

Procedural considerations: Point to (a) burdening "cooperation procedures [that] are disregarded because they add to an overload of procedures" or because of the "non-adaptation of procedures to organizational functioning". In fine, "heavy procedures, duplication of procedures, challenged procedures, [end up] unapplied procedures". From the opposite perspective, the (b) procedures "that organize information sharing, and the mode and frequency of communication" are absent or inapplicable, such as procedures to assign (c) "focal points in each NGO including regulating their absence" or to prevent (c) "unequal visibility for all NGOs".

Common Language: There are major (a) "differences in the reporting proficiency, competency levels, language used, and degrees of formality in interpersonal manners", and (b) "lack of commitment to deadlines and meetings, especially when NGOs have low interest in a project, or lack of staff, or when the NGO is volunteer-based". This leads to (c) "Competing time management priorities, and inadequacy or non-alignment of competency development".

In sum, the major impediments to NGO cooperation, as expressed by actors, point to lack of clarity about strategy and decision-making modes, an overload and duplication of procedures while essential procedures to regulate communication are absent, and differences in the degrees of proficiency and manners among actors.

Underlying reasons of dysfunctional cooperation

Follow-up meetings, in-depth discussions, and expert advice revealed the root of cooperation dysfunctions. They were comforted after discussing and validating them with respondents.

On the **strategy and decision-making** level, NGO cooperation is hindered by past experiences resulting in (a) lack of trust, either for "apprehension from hidden political and confessional affiliations" or because NGOs are "competing for [the same] resources". Another consequential hurdle is the (b) difference in the conception of the role of NGOs in society. Some consider them as the democratic representatives of society at par with parties, parliament, and other constitutional representations. Others consider NGOs as only representing their members working for a specific cause. The divergent perspectives are related to formative experiences. NGOs working mainly with US funding streams take the first stance, while the others take the latter. This dichotomous perception was divulged during the plenary meeting to reach meaning consensus. It was the one unbridgeable difference that polarized the respondents.

For the **procedural considerations**, the root causes relate to NGOs (c) plying to the requirements of donors "that give primacy to procedures over effectiveness and efficiency". In fact, donor agencies are bureaucracies governed by stringent procedures. NGOs working with them face a significant workload to abide by procedures and require specific expertise rarely available. On the other hand, procedural "fatigue" makes them reticent or omit to formalize procedures not required by donors though needed for proper cooperation.

The issue with **common language** regards the "personification of NGOs instead of seeking (d) institutionalization, and the high staff turnover that causes constant loss of competencies and hence [loss of] consistency in cooperation projects". The quote expresses two root causes. First, NGOs operating in Lebanon, despite institutional appearances, are often dependent on the person of the leader who centralizes decision-making rather than good governance practices. Secondly, employees working on cooperation projects build social ties with peers and develop practical knowledge; they are lost when they leave their organization.

To summarize, the root causes of cooperation dysfunctions come from lost trust, overburdening procedures imposed by donors, and the lack of institutionalization.

Courses of action to improve cooperation

The research process guided organizational actors into deliberating actionable solutions. Three focus groups, one for each theme, were formed to conceive solutions to the dysfunctions and root causes revealed. The proposed solutions, conceived in the form of recommendations, were then shared with all respondents for consensus.

Strategy and decision-making: (a) Strategic coalitions should be thematic, while cross-thematic strategies should be project-based, (b) Developing common strategies should accommodate different advocacy styles (some NGOs are more confrontational than others), noting that this diversity required. Coordinated strategies should not jeopardize the individual positioning of NGOs, rather benefit from it, (c) Politically sensitive issues that could draw partisan alignments should be prevented, (d) Cooperation should be among NGOs that have the same drive towards efficiency and commitment, and they should outline what are their material and non-material incentives to cooperate. NGOs should (e) Revive the civic spirit and recruit youth that are more cause-driven in order to retain talent and prevent them being drained towards international NGOs. On the leadership front, (f) Management styles and internal decision-making processes should be clear to partners to rationalize expectations. As for common resources, the recommendations state that for the cooperation enterprise to succeed the (g) Financial means and other resources needed to sustain a long-term cooperation should be budgeted upfront and, share resources such as (f) Support functions like training and recruitment, (g) Communication platforms to improve the outreach, and (h) House cooperative support functions in the premises of one designated partner. Extending cooperation towards smaller NGOs requires (i) Providing smaller NGOs with temporary locations in the premises of more established ones.

Procedural considerations: Procedures are considered a source of good governance, but also a burden when they are not adapted to how cooperation functions, therefore, recommendations stipulate (a) Simplifying the procedures, reviewing them routinely, and adapting them to the common interests and concerted deliverables in order to enhance their adoption, help manage expectations, and prevent emotional excesses, however, (b) For financial transactions, the formalization of procedures, and the commitment to rules of transparency gradually builds up trust. From the perspective of visibility, (c) Formalizing concerted procedures of visibility, reduces the chances of conflict and improves the chances of long-term cooperation, especially when stakes are high. Focal points are germane to cooperation, therefore, (d) Appointing a focal person in NGOs, including a known replacement in case of absence, then documenting communication and information by more than one person assures continuity, taking into consideration that (e) A focal person that is somehow a leader in their organization, not only a contact person, enhances commitment and promptitude in taking action.

Common language: Developing a common language or in other terms, symbiotic organizational cultures helps sustain cooperation, through (a) Encouraging partners to professionalize by formalizing their organizational structures, task allocation, and delineating accountability, improves transparency towards partners, and facilitates trust building, and (b) Developing intra-organizational knowledge sharing and trainings, and tailoring them to the specific needs of individual organizations, enhances cooperation competencies like proposal writing and budgeting, and brings to speed lagging members.

As a synthesis, table 6 titled “NGO Cooperation in Lebanon: Results from the field” summarizes the principal dysfunctions, their root causes, and actions to undertake following the identified themes.

TABLE 6
NGO Cooperation in Lebanon: Results from the field

What not to do	Root causes	What to do
Strategic Considerations		
Lacking clarity in strategic orientation of individual NGOs and the adverse effects of political and confessional affiliation	Lack of trust in the other due to unsuccessful past cooperation experiences, especially that NGOs need to cooperate for survival while competing for resources	Strategic coalitions should be thematic, while cross-thematic strategies should be project based
		Developing common strategies should accommodate different advocacy styles (some NGOs are more confrontational than others), noting that this diversity is recommended and required. Coordinated strategies should not jeopardize the individual positioning of NGOs, rather benefit from it (Synchronized Decentralization)
		Politically sensitive issues that could drag partisan alignments should be prevented
	Difference in the conception of the role of NGOs in society	Cooperation should be among NGOs that have the same drive towards efficiency and commitment, and they should outline what are their material and non-material incentives to cooperate
Revive the civic spirit and recruit youth that are more cause-driven in order to retain talent and prevent them being drained towards international NGOs		
Leadership and decision making		
Lack of transparency towards partners about the decision making process within individual NGOs		Management styles and internal decision making processes should be clear to partners to rationalize expectations

TABLE 6
NGO Cooperation in Lebanon: Results from the field

What not to do	Root causes	What to do
Common resources		
		Considering the means to sustain a long-term engagement improves the chances to succeed cooperation
		Sharing a platform to communicate with the public (social media, mailing list,...) enhances and diversifies the outreach including individual NGOs' outreach
		Sharing support functions, including recruitment, reduces the financial burden on individual NGOs, and improves their efficiency
		Housing support functions dedicated for the cooperation enterprise at partners' premises assures its sustainability
		Sharing training programs using individual resources, [e.g. NGOs dedicate a certain number of hours periodically for common trainings], rapproches competencies and language used in communications and reports
		Larger NGOs providing smaller NGOs with temporary locations enhances the sustainability of smaller NGOs and cooperation prospects.
Adaptation and Adoption of Shared Procedures		Procedures, communication, information sharing
Burdening procedures that organize cooperation among NGOs, especially when they add to an internal procedural overload	Plying to the requirements that gives primacy to procedures and visibility over effectiveness in social advocacy and efficiency in resource allocation	Simplifying the procedures, reviewing them routinely, and adapting them to the common interests and concerted deliverables in order to enhance their adoption, help manage expectations, and prevent emotional excesses
Absence or difficult to apply procedures that organize information sharing, and the mode and frequency of communication		For financial transactions, the formalization of procedures, and the commitment to rules of transparency gradually builds up trust
Unequal visibility for all NGOs		Formalizing concerted procedures of visibility, reduces the chances of conflict and improves the chances of long-term cooperation, especially when stakes are high
Absence of focal points in each NGO including regulating their absence		Appointing of a focal person in NGOs, including a known replacement in case of absence, then documenting communication and information by more than one person assures continuity
		A focal person that is somehow a leader in her organization, not only a contact person, enhances commitment and promptitude in taking action
Common Language		
Differences in the reporting proficiency, competency levels, language used, and degrees of formality in interpersonal manners	Personification of NGOs instead of seeking institutionalization, and the high staff turnover that cause constant loss of competencies and hence consistency in cooperation projects	Encouraging partners to professionalize through formalizing their organizational structures and task allocation, and delineating accountability, improves transparency towards partners, and facilitates trust building
Lack of commitment to deadlines and meetings, especially when NGOs have low interest in a project, or lack of staff, or when the NGO is volunteer-based		Developing intra-organizational knowledge sharing and trainings, and tailoring them to the specific needs of individual organizations, enhances cooperation competencies like proposal writing and budgeting, and brings to speed cooperation components

Historical event verifies the findings

A historical event happened towards the end of this research. It allowed researchers in-vivo observations of NGOs acting in a nationwide movement to change the government. The social movement per se is outside the scope of this research but it provided the opportunity for the verification of findings in a large-scale real-life occurrence. It was able to bring down the government and dramatically change the political narrative. The movement was highly decentralized, both geographically and in terms of activist claims, with no central leadership. It succeeded almost instantly and relatively peacefully with seemingly no cooperation mechanisms among civil society actors. It led many to consider

that there is no need to cooperate among organizations. However, it became clear that in order to sustain change, cooperation among organizations is requisite of success. This led the NGOs to change their position closer to what these research findings are: Clarifying strategic orientations and political affiliations, agreeing on a specific project, accommodating the less radical activists, and moving away from partisan slogans, disseminating information effectively, bringing language closer, and coordinating action.

The remaining part of the paper looks into the relation between inter and intra-organizational dysfunctions and goes beyond the practical implications.

Discussion

This paragraph discusses the theoretical implications notably towards the relation between inter and intra-organizational dysfunctions, then practical implications and limitations of the research.

Intra-organizational dysfunctions are reproduced when NGOs cooperate

The vertical diagnoses indicated that intra-organizational dysfunctions concurrently found in both NGOs were present in interorganizational cooperation (Table 7). Out of eleven dysfunctions, seven are invariable instances across SPRING, RESTORE, and NGO cooperation.

TABLE 7

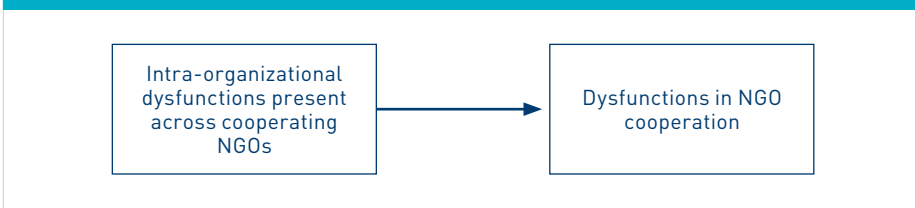
Synthesis of transversality of inter and intra-organizational dysfunctions

Dysfunctions	Spring	Restore	Cooperation
Strategy and decision-making			
Lack of strategic clarity/orientation	X	X	X
Lack of clarity on decision-making	X	X	X
Procedural considerations			
Burdening or inapplicable procedures	X	X	X
Deficiency in flow of information and meetings organization	X	X	X
Common language			
Lack of commitment to deadlines and meetings	X	X	X
Lack of competencies	X	X	X
Lack of institutionalization and management control system	X	X	X
Others			
Uneven visibility of individuals		X	X
Absence of an assigned focal point and replacement			X
Low compensation scale and revenue diversification	X		
Excessive number of business models	X		

The remaining dysfunctions, four in total, are not present across the board nor do they inscribe in one of the three dysfunction themes identified previously. Discussions with focus groups and experts and comparisons with literature supported the proposition that *Organizational dysfunctions spread from within organizations into organizational cooperation*. The argument goes that NGOs predate cooperation. They already have their structures and behaviors and tend to transfer them when they attempt cooperation with other NGOs. This rationale is supported by the socio-economic and structuration theories (Savall, Zardet, 2008; Giddens, 1984). They stipulate that dysfunctions are the result of the interaction between structures and behaviors and that actors endeavoring into

FIGURE 2

Relation between intra-organizational dysfunctions and dysfunctions in NGO cooperation



cooperation bring their behaviors with them and tend to reproduce similar structures. Figure 2 illustrates a relation between dysfunctions that runs from the intra and into the interorganizational dysfunctions.

Improving interorganizational cooperation improves intra-organizational functioning

Looking at the improvement initiatives table 8 shows that those proposed to improve cooperation were often proposed to improve intra-organizational functioning.

Under **Strategy and Decision-making**, periodically reviewing the cooperation strategy and clarifying the strategic orientation is mirrored in organizations. Asking NGOs to be clear about their orientation while cooperating with other NGOs made them rethink their own and become transparent about how decisions are made. That cooperation be thematic or otherwise centered on a specific project implicitly anchors strategies in societal needs, because, by design, NGO projects target specific societal needs. This was explicit at the intra level.

Under **Procedural considerations**, simplifying and adapting cooperation procedures and instating negotiated accountability were shared. Ensuring the same level of commitment, and aligning proposal writing capabilities go concurrently under **Common language**. However, preventing political and confessional sensitivity, accommodating advocacy styles, assigning focal points, securing upfront financial resources, and recruiting youth were only cooperation-centered propositions.

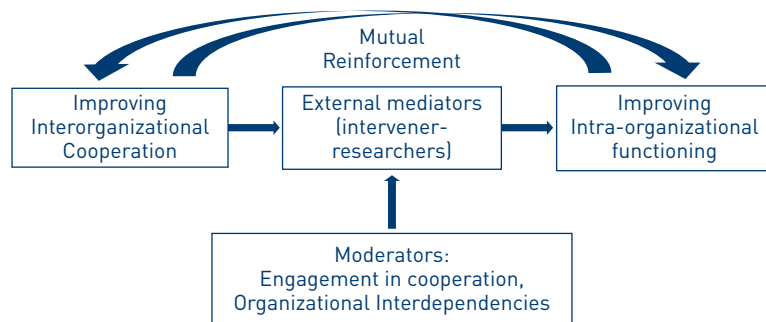
Framework for the relation between inter and intra-organizational improvement initiatives

As a result of the intervention SPRING and RESTORE started cooperating in two projects, management of a natural reserve and a solid waste project. Concurrently, they embarked on intra-organizational development. The conjunction suggests an interstructuration and mutual reinforcement of the inter/intra dyad since the more an organization is engaged in cooperation, the more it seeks internal improvement (Giddens, 1984; Montuori, 2013). Conversely, improving internally reduces cooperation dysfunctions thus closing a virtuous loop of inter/intra improvements. Theory supports this conclusion since internal and external cooperation serve as facilitators to each other (Dahl, 2014) and cooperation is contingent on a developmental paradigm (Kang, 2013) entraining actors' involvement and organizational partnerships (Stoker, 2006). Figure 3 proposes a framework describing the relation between improvement initiatives at the inter and intra-organizational levels.

TABLE 8
Synthesis of transversality of inter/intra-organizational improvement initiatives

Improvement initiatives	Spring	Restore	Improvement of cooperation
Strategy and decision-making			
Review strategy periodically/Clear orientation	X	X	X
Be clear and transparent about decision-making	X	X	X
Anchor strategy in needs	X	X	Implicit
Procedural considerations			
Simplify and adapt procedures	X	X	X
Instate negotiated accountability	X	X	X
Common Language			
Insure commitment (same level of commitment)	X	X	X
Build and align proposal writing capacity	X	X	X
Others			
Assure (individual) visibility	X	X	X
Improve time management	X	X	X
Organize meetings	X	X	X
Improvement initiatives specific to the context of interorganizational cooperation			
Prevent political and confessional sensitivity			X
Accommodate advocacy styles			X
Assign a focal point with leadership attributes and replacement in case of absenteeism			X
Assure financial resources and physical premises to sustain cooperation			X
Recruit youth to restore civic engagement			X

FIGURE 3
Relation between inter and intra-organizational improvement initiatives



The framework suggests that intra-organizational and interorganizational improvement are mutually reinforcing. It is not causal though, because the internal development could happen without the intermediation of cooperation. However, external mediators (intervener-researchers in the specific case of this research) provided the conduit from improving cooperation into internal improvements; the relation was moderated by contingent factors such as the engagement of individual NGOs and their interdependencies.

Managerial implications

The practical implications are narrated with excerpts from the interviews (Table 5).

Strategy and decision-making, the recommendation that NGO leaders produced is to adopt project-based or theme-based cooperation with “*minimal strategy at least*”, “*clearly voted starting point and objectives*”, and a “*clear roadmap with milestones for the terms of cooperation*” which reflects the **concertation** and **contractualization** concepts. This was appended by the advice to cooperate with few members that are committed because “*networks should not be enforced on NGOs*”. Cooperation literature supports both ideas; success is contingent on content and context. The content relates to the purpose of cooperation; context relates to how constituents fit together because the choice of partners produces more stable results (Stoker, 2006; Roberts, 2015). Tolerating various advocacy styles finds the subject at home with balanced constituency. The theory posits that key to the success of cooperation is to maintain a balanced membership and to reflect it in the networks (Collins and Porras, 2005). The balance among partners touches on advocacy styles, like being confrontational and vocal versus the more accommodating modes of militancy; “*we need vocal people, not everybody can do it. Our style is more accommodating. We need to maintain the good relations that we developed with the politicians and public servants when we previously worked with them on laws. They have come to trust us, but the pressure from the street helps*”. This reflects the tolerance for divergence in **contracutalization** because NGOs land into cooperation with specific needs then move forward with collective objectives.

Balancing the constituency also touched on issues of even visibility. The latter is considered a strategic resource for NGOs to attract funding; some “*NGOs are coalescing just for the purpose of visibility*” rather than “*genuine interest in the advocated subject*”. Therefore, making explicit to partners the material and non-material incentives that motivate the adherence to cooperation is essential. There should be an “*agreement that defines what the relation between the NGOs is... We are competing for the same resources; we need visibility to attract funds*”. This reflects the communication side of **concertation** and the reciprocity aspect of **contractualization**. They are prescriptively expressed by the negotiation of “*specific and shared objective*” and formalizing a “*balanced distribution of tasks between [cooperation] members*” to assure “*commitment and seriousness in task accomplishment*”.

Procedural aspects and **common language** knit together. The procedures commended by respondents are there to develop a “common language” in the sense of common semantics, level competencies, similar commitment and relational norms in order to build relational proximity (Talbot, 2009) and subsequently micro-climates of cooperation (Etzioni, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Edwards, 2014). The prescription is symbiotic with theory stipulating cooperation is a vessel for bonding and trust building (Woolcock, 1988). It is

favoured by the formalization of sensitive procedures like “*rules of ethics and social etiquette*”, transparency of financial transactions, and “*parties meeting frequently and being aware of each other’s experiences*”; but also, by the “*use the same language or technical term [inology]*”. Another prescription to formalize internal structures, task allocation, and accountability, to go “*beyond the person-centered NGO; to have structure in the NGO*” is a call for institutionalization. It is shared by theories of NGO accountability as basis for legitimacy and sustainability (Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2006). However, cooperation is not only thought of in terms of processes and procedures, rather in terms of informal routines (North, 1991). This reflects the structure-agency concept. Both structuration and the socio-economic theories uphold that agency and structure affect each other; procedures being an intangible structure that exhibits relative stability over time (Giddens, 1984; Savall, 1975, 1979, 2017). The **procedural aspects** also tackled active communication as fundamental for the concepts of concertation and contractualization. Effective deliberation requires improving the plausibility, timing, and proficiency of information (Savall and Zardet, 2008). Elements of action in this direction call to appoint focal points to frame “*clear communication and information sharing processes ... taking into consideration the different point of views*”.

The recommendations to improve cooperation (Table 6) thus directly confirm the concepts of concertation, contractualization, and the duality of structure and agency (Table 1). They are immediately mobilizable by NGO actors wishing to succeed working together.

Limitations

The research is limited in scope and outreach. It is limited to a few NGOs operating in Lebanon without pretention to transferability. However, the pertinence of the findings suggests to prudently exploring further the concepts elaborated. On the other hand, applied research constantly arise questions about the extent and sustainability the intervention. Exit interviews with organizational leaders provide elements of answers on the organizational and personal levels. One leader was quoted as saying:

“It’s a good thing to cooperate with NGOs that use the same language. It’s a pledge for trust... We still have a long way to go, but we are on track. The energy and the number of initiatives generated by the intervention are astonishing. We are thinking big, we want to expand the initiatives that came out of the research”.

Another leader was more specific stating that the intervention:

“Was an eye opener ... what we need the most is the analysis of competencies, job description and procedures”.

A third leader mentioned:

“Reading a lot on organizational development and the socio-economic theory. It jumped to the top of my interests after the intervention”.

Further research on the longitudinal evolution of cooperation is thus warranted. Additionally, at the outpost of the research, the confirmation that dysfunctions are ubiquitous in NGO cooperation and that improving cooperation improves their performance, leads naturally to questioning about measuring their inter-relationships.

Conclusion

The challenges of cooperation among NGOs in the Middle East are thinly studied despite growth in the sector. Unsuccessful cooperation threatens the credibility of NGOs and their survival. This research adopted an intervention research methodology to inductively

discover cooperation dysfunctions, reasons of dysfunctions, and propose solutions. Working with fifteen NGOs active in Lebanon, actors pointed this research towards the theoretical frameworks of the evolution of cooperation, the structuration theory, and the socio-economic theory. The diagnostic findings clustered cooperation dysfunctions into strategic considerations, decision-making, procedural adaptation, and the development of a common language. The cooperation dysfunctions were found to be reinforced by mistrust among NGO leaders due to past experiences and differing conceptions of the role of NGOs in society. Diagnostic findings were appended with actionable solutions devised by the actors, revolving around clarity of strategic orientations and affiliations, concerted thematic strategies for common causes otherwise project-based action plans, and sharing of support functions. Solutions also included reciprocal transparency regarding decision-making processes, continuous concertation, and shared visibility. And finally, recommendations include matching commitment levels, encouraging the professionalization of structures and sharing trainings and resources. The theoretical contribution stipulates that internal dysfunctions ubiquitous cooperating organizations are transferred into interorganizational cooperation. While intra and interorganizational improvements were found to affect each other, however, moderated by several internal and external factors. Further research is warranted to address the sustainability of prescriptive findings, and the effects of idiosyncratic management complacency on cooperation among NGOs and society in general.

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