

RESEARCH ARTICLE

How Effective Cooperation Among NPOs Is Achieved: An Analysis Based on Network Structure Evolution and Resource Orchestration

Lei Wu¹ | Qian Zhang²  | Chengcheng Song³  | Xiyu Xu¹

¹School of Management, Shanghai University of Engineering Science, Shanghai, China | ²School of Public Administration, Zhejiang Gongshang University, Hangzhou, China | ³School of International Relations and Public Affairs, Fudan University, Shanghai, China

Correspondence: Chengcheng Song (zhedasong@163.com)

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ABSTRACT

Cooperation among nonprofit organizations (NPOs) has become a core issue in recent literature, yet few studies examine the mechanisms of effective interorganizational cooperation from a dynamic evolution perspective. Drawing on network governance and resource orchestration theories, this study investigates NPO cooperation in M Village, S City, China. The findings reveal a stepwise evolution from Network Administrative Organization (NAO) to Lead Organization Network (LON) and eventually to Shared Governance Network (SGN), corresponding to dynamic resource strategies of construction, bundling, and utilization. In the NAO stage, interorganizational cooperation relies on the intervention of institutional authority to address legitimacy challenges, initiating collaboration through policy support and resource provision. In the LON stage, cooperation centers on a core organization, where specialized division of labor and project branding enable resource bundling and enhance collaborative efficiency. In the SGN stage, interorganizational cooperation leverages decentralized platforms to activate the autonomy of diverse actors, promoting fluid resource exchange and value cocreation between organizations and local stakeholders. The study concludes that effective cooperation among NPOs does not rely solely on institutional design or elite leadership but instead emerges from the dynamic balance between structural flexibility and adaptive deployment of resource strategies.

1 | Introduction

Scholars have documented cooperative and collaborative behaviors among nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in community service and natural resource management initiatives (Snively and Tracy 2000; Gazley and Guo 2020; Hung et al. 2025). In the past, such forms of cooperation were typically project-based, short-term, and characterized by informal and loose relationships

among participating organizations. However, with the growing global emphasis on climate change, local poverty alleviation, disaster relief, and humanitarian aid, the scope of nonprofit cooperation has undergone significant transformation. This shift is marked by an expansion in the areas of cooperation and the rise of more network-oriented forms of engagement (Malatesta and Smith 2014; Murdie 2014; Shumate et al. 2017; Kassem et al. 2021).

Lei Wu and Qian Zhang contributed equally to this study.

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These developments reveal a notable trend: NPOs are increasingly moving away from the traditional short-term, ad hoc project-based cooperation to more formalized and institutionalized long-term alliances. Such alliances often take the form of collaborative networks, with one or several core organizations serving as the focal points for coordination and resource integration. Through these networks, NPOs are able to undertake more comprehensive and sustained efforts that enhance their collective impact in local development and community-building endeavors. For instance, in the Puget Sound area of Washington State, USA, eco-focused nonprofits and local government water agencies have jointly created consultation mechanisms and data-sharing platforms to improve water quality and ecosystem restoration. In Mexico's Oaxaca region, local grassroots groups and international NPOs have formed advocacy networks to engage in lobbying and public campaigns focused on land rights and minority causes (Gazley and Guo 2020).

The main reason for cooperation is that individual NPOs often face issues such as insufficient resources and limited capabilities, making it difficult for them to address complex social problems independently (Santos and Laureano 2023). Since Chinese NPOs are highly dependent on the party-state, they prefer to partner with government departments rather than with peers organizations (Hsu and Jiang 2015; Hu et al. 2016). The development of nonprofits in China is nestled within the institutional framework of the “dual management system,”¹ and their organizational forms bear the distinct characteristics of a “state-dominated civil society.” Hsu and Jiang describe the role of the Chinese government as “the center of resources and power, a site for one-stop shopping for everything an NGO needed” (Hsu and Jiang 2015). Others portray Chinese NPOs as “fundamentally embedded in or controlled by party-state institutions and lack autonomy” (Ni and Zhan 2017). Therefore, cooperation among different types of NPOs remains relatively scarce in China.

This paper employs a case study approach to examine how NPOs overcome resource constraints via cooperative networks in the context of the so-called “strong state and weak society.” We analyze a typical case of NPO participation in the development of M Village in S City, China, to explain the dynamic process of cooperation among NPOs from the perspectives of network structure and resource orchestration. Through this case, the study explores how cooperation among NPOs evolves across different stages, reshaping organizational cognition and leading to new forms of governance that produce phased cooperative outcomes.

This study aims to advance existing research in two key aspects. First, from a theoretical perspective, limited data availability and the absence of a unified framework have left the stages of cooperation among NPOs largely unexplored, particularly in non-Western contexts such as China. This study addresses this theoretical gap. Second, from a policy or practical perspective, cooperation among NPOs may function in ways comparable to cooperation between government and NPOs, or between enterprises and NPOs. These findings provide insights for policymakers, government departments, and NPO managers in strong-state-tradition contexts.

2 | Theoretical Background and Analytical Framework

2.1 | Interorganizational Cooperation

Cooperation refers to relationship between subjects (individuals, groups, or organizations) based on working together (Gray and Wood 1991; Hung et al. 2025). Although some literature treats organizational collaboration as a broader than notion than cooperation (Gazley and Guo 2020), they share many core elements. Following Murdie's (2014) study in non-Western countries, this paper adopts the term “cooperation.” Some scholars define interorganizational cooperation as stakeholders (Koch and Johnson 1997; Birrell and Hayes 2004; Salamon and Toepler 2015) participating in collective decision-making through dialog and mutual communication, involving formal activities of “joint subjects, joint structures, and shared resources” (Connick and Innes 2003). Existing research on interorganizational cooperation focuses primarily on two perspectives: the structural perspective and the resource perspective.

2.1.1 | Structural Perspective

Some scholars view network structures as a tool for organizations to solve complex problems, providing an environment for information sharing and promoting organizational innovation (Gazley and Guo 2020). Within such networks, “central” nodes are considered strategically significant (Fonseca et al. 2017). After all, the “central nodes” composed of individuals who possess critical technologies and information, form the core of the network structure, improving information exchange, system integration, and innovation. Central nodes utilize their resources and leadership advantages to enhance overall network performance (Bizzi 2024).

The structural perspective offers key insights into how interorganizational cooperation forms. The driving forces of cooperation stem from the inherent connectivity among organizations, which creates initial links. Organizations with “centrality” often occupy “structural holes,” acting as information intermediaries to cut transaction costs in cross-organizational collaboration. This structural advantage makes them natural initiators or sustainers of cooperation (Burt 1992). By controlling key technologies and monopolizing diverse information, they generate radiating channels of cooperation. In essence, interorganizational cooperation arises from the combined effects of network position advantages and problem complexity. Core organizations, with their structural embeddedness, serve as “architects” of cooperative networks (Ni and Zhan 2017).

2.1.2 | Resource Perspectives

Scharpf (1978) pointed out that cooperative behavior is a rational choice constrained by resource limitations, incorporating financial resources, personnel, venues, information, legitimacy, and authority as complementary resource elements that organizations require. The demand for resources among organizations is thus an important variable that activates cooperative

actions, exerting a positive impact on organizational cooperation (Huynh et al. 2023). Other scholars believe that the structural formation of multi-organizational cooperation networks is related to the nature of exchanged resources. Tacit resources—such as knowledge and information, reputation, and influence—can attract needed resources and shape the behavior of other organizations. These resources also include government-authorized powers granted to NPOs, compensating for the lack of vertical control by the government (Provan and Huang 2012). Additionally, the research analyzing the formation mechanism of organizational cooperation from a resource action perspective points out that resource bricolage and resource optimization are resource actions taken by organizational managers at different stages (Bowman and Collier 2006; Kun and Dieckmann 2013).

The resource perspective explains the endogenous motivation and sustainability of interorganizational cooperation. Relationship continuation depends not only on initial resource complementarity but also on adaptive resource management. During sustained cooperation, organizations face pressure to restructure resource-dependency paths (Tuurnas et al. 2023). When complementary resources experience diminishing marginal returns, partnerships may fall into a “resource lock-in” dilemma. Tacit knowledge sharing and authoritative resource exchange can enhance cooperation stability (Ang and Jia 2014). In asymmetric dependencies, weaker organizations can rebalance discourse power by exporting expertise. Long-term government-nonprofit partnerships show that when key resources and professional capabilities form a reciprocal exchange cycle, vertical control and horizontal collaboration can create synergies, which are key to overcoming the life-cycle limitations of cooperation.

2.2 | Cooperation Formation Among NPOs and Network Structure Evolution

The network is a structural concept emphasizing multi-center coordination rather than single-center hierarchy (Randma-Liiv et al. 2015). The formation of a network structure aims to achieve goals that single entities cannot accomplish on their own. However, network governance does not occur automatically; resolving governance issues and generating effectiveness depend on network-level governance capabilities (Naveed and Azhar 2022). When organizations face different external environmental demands and internal task pressures, they form different structures shaped by factors such as the richness of resources and information, the degree of coordination in actions, the balance of power, the level of trust, and the consistency of vision goals (Schwarz et al. 2020; Fushimi 2024).

Provan and Kenis (2008) consider networks as a governance mechanism where two or more organizations consciously depend on each other and cooperate. They identify three types of network governance models based on whether there is an “independent manager” or “central resource provider”: the Network Administrative Organization (NAO), the Lead Organization Network (LON), and the Shared Governance Network (SGN). In the NAO model, an independent management entity, sometimes the government, oversees network activities. In some cases, the government provides targeted funding and promotes the development of local self-organizations at the network’s inception, thereby

achieving broader goals related to regional development (Gebauer et al. 2005). In another scenario, where resource and capability disparities exist among participants in the network, major network-level activities and key decisions are coordinated through a lead organization. The LON model means that network governance no longer relies on government administrative resources but is led and organized by an intermediary organization that assumes a critical role in managing the network (Graddy and Chen 2006). Despite the differences, equal participation of all members remains the ultimate goal of network governance. The SGN model, by contrast, emphasizes self-governance by member organizations without a separate and sole governing entity, which enhances the overall “organizational capacity” (Unterhitzberger et al. 2023).

This study applies Provan and Kenis’ network governance theory to explain the cooperative behavior among NPOs, analyzing the relative changes in power, discourse, and resource integration capabilities of NPOs during cooperation: Initially, nonprofits often need support from governments or other strong resource-holders. In this stage, NAO arrangements operate through governmental or public sector bodies that act as authority centers, guiding nonprofits toward common goals and initiating cooperation through policies, funding, and organizational training (Provan and Kenis 2008). As internal network relations stabilize and a core organization with strong leadership and resource-integration capabilities emerges, the partnership enters the LON stage, where reliance on government resources lessens, and the core organization takes on a “leading and coordination” role to deepen cooperation (Provan et al. 2011). Finally, as trust and self-sufficiency among nonprofits increases, cooperation can evolve into SGN, where network members engage in resource sharing, strategy formulation, and collective action in a decentralized manner (Provan and Huang 2012). The three network forms are not isolated but can appear sequentially or overlap in practice, forming an evolving system of NPO cooperation.

2.3 | Cooperation Stability Among NPOs and Resource Orchestration

Resources are crucial factors influencing organizational performance. From the resource-based view, the heterogeneity of resources determines differences in competitiveness (Gruber et al. 2010; Paarlberg and Hwang 2017). However, the resource-based view cannot effectively explain the competitive situation among organizations with similar resource endowments. Resource orchestration theory provides an explanation for this. Sirmon et al. (2011) argue that active resource deployment by managers is the key to differences in enterprise performance, laying the foundation for resource orchestration theory. According to its logical framework, resource orchestration includes structuring the resource portfolio, bundling resources to build capabilities, and leveraging resources and capabilities (Iyer et al. 2023). This process involves acquiring, accumulating, stabilizing, and improving existing capabilities, while also expanding capabilities and creating new ones (Carnes et al. 2017; Hughes et al. 2018; Jin et al. 2025).

Existing studies generally suggest that cooperative relationships can provide the resources needed for organizational growth (AbouAssi and Jo 2017; Fernandes et al. 2022). Research on how

new ventures collaboratively create value shows that resource orchestration serves as an intermediary for collaborative value creation and performance improvement by integrating resource structuring, transformation, and coordination into the evolution of collaborative value creation in enterprises (Iyer et al. 2023). Other scholars emphasize that organizational cooperation requires stage-specific resource orchestration, including the identification and aggregation of business resources, the upgrading and transformation of data resources, and the creation of value linkage (Benaben and Vernadat 2017).

Prior studies thus seek to explain how organizations can sustain partnerships and achieve common goals. Their findings suggest that at different developmental stages, businesses need to update skills and build innovation capacity to boost organizational potential, leading to varied resource-orchestration strategies. Although nonprofits differ from businesses in their structures and features, they too rely heavily on internal and external resources. Thus, applying resource orchestration theory to the study of NPO cooperation is well-suited.

2.4 | An Integrated Analytical Framework

In line with the above analysis, this study integrates the network governance model with the “construction-bundling-utilization” framework of resource orchestration to illustrate the patterns of cooperation among NPOs (see Figure 1). Initially, NPO cooperation often begins under the guidance of an external authoritative body (e.g., the government). At this point, organizations

typically face challenges such as limited resources, scattered capabilities, and weak trust. The cooperative strategy here focuses on establishing a basic resource pool, relying on external authority for explicit resource inputs (funding, policy support) and implicit resource activation (legitimacy endorsement, organizational training) to kick-start cooperation. In the mid-term stage, as network member relationships stabilize, cooperation deepens. Core organizations, with stronger resource integration capacities, take on leadership roles in the network. Their strategies focus on resource bundling and capability transformation. Through specialization and institutionalized collaboration, they convert dispersed resources into coordination and connection capacities that strengthen collective action. In the late stage, the cooperative network expands, with significantly enhanced trust and goal consistency among members. The external authoritative body withdraws, while core organizations focus on resource utilization and capability expansion. They shift the network center to multiple parties, stimulating other organizations’ innovation through decentralized decision-making and achieving resource value creation and continuous regeneration.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design and Data Collection

This study primarily employs the case study method. Case study research involves collecting data through interviews, observations, historical archives, natural experiments, and other methods. Through rigorous qualitative analysis, it examines certain

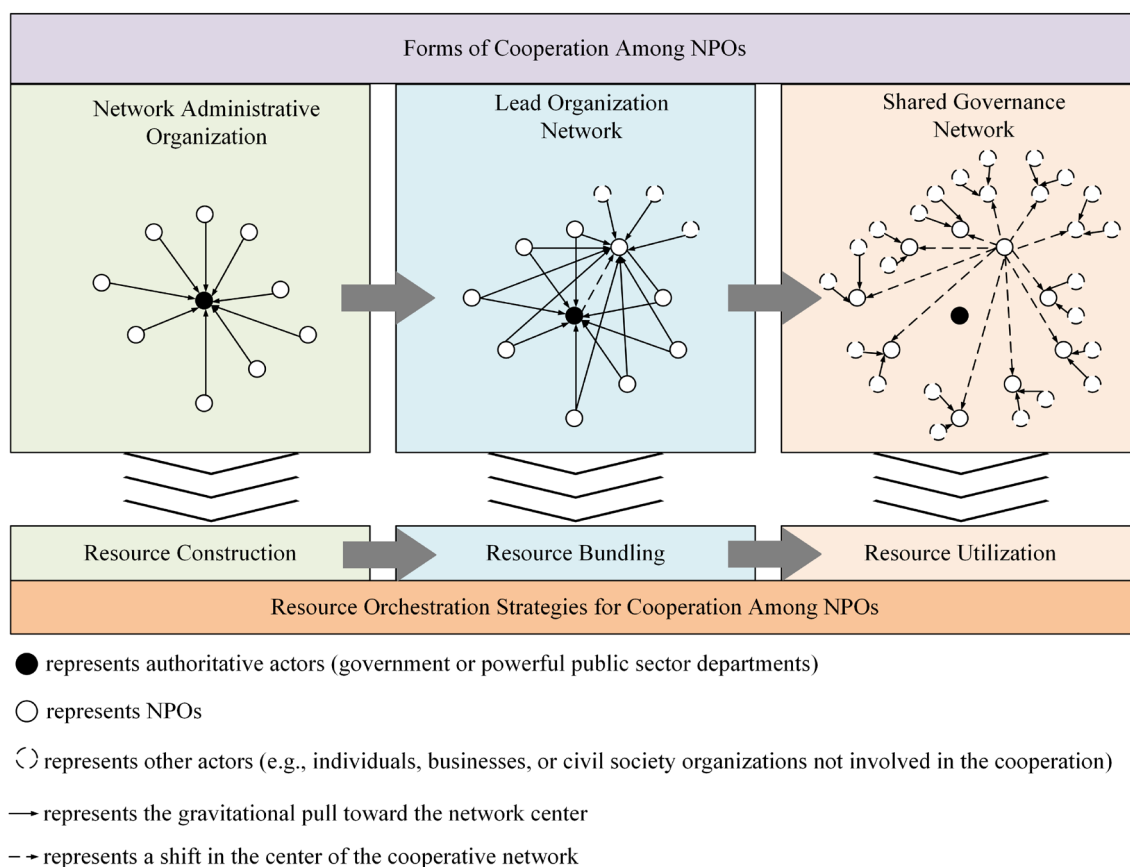


FIGURE 1 | Integration framework of the dynamic network governance model.

phenomena and draws empirical conclusions that have general applicability. Robert K. Yin proposed a positivist case study paradigm for theoretical validation, emphasizing that case studies should be conducted based on a clear problem awareness and a well-defined theoretical framework (Baskarada 2014). This study is grounded in an analytical framework that combines network structure and resource orchestration theories. It focuses on the multiple NPOs assisting the development of M Village to explore how interorganizational cooperation is formed and how specific forms of cooperation unfold, thereby addressing “Why” and “How” questions.

The case data consist of four-year longitudinal observations and records of M Village. From 2021 to 2025, team members participated multiple times in internal meetings held by the M Village Committee and the Management Committee of the NPO Practice Base, as well as in small group meetings involving municipal and district-level leaders. Each meeting lasted approximately 1–33 h. Additionally, through participatory observation, we established good relationships with over 20 members of NPOs, members of the Village Committee, and some villagers. We conducted individual semi-structured interviews with each of them, lasting 20–40 min. The resulting meeting notes and interview transcripts concerning NPO participation in rural governance in M Village were compiled, summarized, and systematized, producing a large corpus of textual materials (see Table 1). To verify the authenticity of the materials, we supplemented and corroborated these materials with sources from local government websites, WeChat public accounts, news reports, and other web pages dating back to 2018.

3.2 | Background

M village is located in the southwestern part of J District, S City, and is primarily engaged in agricultural cultivation. The village covers 2.6 km², with a registered population of over 1700 people and a permanent population of over 900 people, two-thirds of whom are elderly. M Village is geographically remote and economically underdeveloped. Before 2010, the village had village-run enterprises, but these gradually declined due to an imbalanced population structure and the outmigration of young people. Villagers lacked the awareness of active participation and innovation in rural development, relying passively on government subsidies to improve their income. The “three teams” (party organization leaders, women’s team leaders, and village group leaders) in the village had limited resources and capabilities, further slowing the pace of development.

In 2017, three NPOs were based in F Town, where M Village is located. Starting in 2018, they undertook social service projects purchased by the local government and organized numerous public welfare activities each year, though few were oriented toward rural development. The cooperation among organizations originated from a central government-supported NPO talent training program—NPO Talent Training Class—held by the renowned Chinese university T University. In 2020, T University held the first elite reserve talent training class for public welfare organizations, attracting wide social attention. With central government support in 2021, T University expanded the training scale and extended the training duration to 1 month, promoting interaction

and exchange among NPOs. That same year, the local government established the “Resident Village Instructor” project, dispatching government officials to M Village to provide on-site guidance.² The involvement of resident village instructors clarified the direction for a series of subsequent actions by NPOs. The instructors liaised with NPOs, guided farmers in planting corn, and, together with NPOs, created the “Love JS Glutinous Corn” brand, which ensured unified sales and increased the farmers’ income. In November 2021, M Village established the city’s first “NPO Assisting Rural Governance Practice Base.” Through this initiative, NPOs successfully embedded themselves in the local rural governance structure and created a public welfare loop through fully socialized project operations, bringing actual income increases and improvements in living standards for the farmers.

In China, NPOs engaged in local poverty alleviation and rural development are categorized into three types: The first category comprises organizations established under the leadership of government departments or their subordinate agencies, commonly referred to as government-organized nongovernmental organizations (GONGOs). Such organizations typically receive institutional endorsement and resource support from the government at the outset and are registered in accordance with *the Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Social Organizations*, *the Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Private Nonenterprise Units*, and *the Regulations on the Administration of Foundations*. Under the “dual management” system, these regulations require that an organization obtain prior approval from a competent business supervisory unit (usually a relevant government department) before registration. The second category consists of semi-official hub organizations, such as federations of social organizations or social organization service centers established or approved by the government. These entities serve as bridges and platforms for resource integration, information exchange, and policy coordination, and they undertake functions such as sectoral coordination, service provision, and oversight. The third category encompasses grassroots social organizations, typically initiated by local community or village actors. Lacking a government department or industry body willing to serve as their supervisory unit, such organizations often find it difficult to obtain legal person registration under the current framework of *the Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Social Organizations*, *the Interim Regulations on the Registration and Administration of Private Nonenterprise Units*, and *the Regulations on the Administration of Foundations*. To circumvent the constraints of the dual management system, they often register as commercial entities or affiliate with already-registered organizations. Constrained by limited resources and organizational capacity, their activities are usually confined to specific areas of public service. The NPOs examined in this study belong to the third category.

4 | Case Analysis: NPOs Cooperation in M Village

From a temporal perspective, interorganizational cooperation among NPOs in M Village has undergone three stages: initial formation, deepening, and expansion. Across these stages, different collaborative structures have shaped the orchestration of resources, resulting in varied outcomes for both the NPOs and the development of M Village.

TABLE 1 | Details of interview materials.

Time of interview	Interview material ID	Interviewee identity
2021.12–2022.03	MCCWHA01	M Village's Construction Instructor
	MCCWHA02	M Village's Party Branch Secretary
	MCCWHA03	Head of Organization A (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
	MCCWHA04	Member of Organization B (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
	MCCWHA05	Member of Organization D (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
	MCCWHA06	Member of Foundation R (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
	MCCWHA07	Head of Organization C
2022.04–2022.10	MCCWHB01	Director of District S Civil Affairs Social Service Agency
	MCCWHB02	Deputy Director of District S Civil Affairs Social Service Agency
	MCCWHB03	Director of T City China Urban Development Research Institute
	MCCWHB04	Leader of J District Community-based Organization
	MCCWHB05	Section Chief of Social Organization Management in District J
	MCCWHB06	Director of Township F Construction Office
2022.12–2023.01	MCCWHD01	M Village's Party Branch Secretary
	MCCWHD02	Head of Organization D
	MCCWHD03	Professor W.L. of University E
2023.02	MCCWHC01	M Village's Village Committee Member
	MCCWHC02	M Village's Party Branch Secretary
	MCCWHC03	Head of Organization A (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
	MCCWHC04	Member of Organization B (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
	MCCWHC05	Member of Organization D (Member of Social Organization Governing Committee)
2023.03	GCKJ01	Head of Organization C
2023.06	GWHBGS01	Head of Organization C
2024.02–2024.08	MCXBL01	M Village's Village Committee Member
	MCXBL02	M Village's Village Committee Director
	MCXBL03	M Village's Villager A
	MCXBL04	M Village's Villager B
2025.03	XS01	Head of Organization D
	XS02	Professor W.L. of University E

Note: Interview material ID = Abbreviation of research site + Serial number.

4.1 | Stage One: Initial Formation of NPO Cooperation (December 2020 to November 2021)

4.1.1 | Drivers of Early Cooperation: Alignment Between Local Development Needs and Organizational Missions

As shown in Figure 2, the early-stage cooperation among NPOs in M Village was enabled by multiple forces: national policy guidance, policy implementation by the municipal civil affairs

department, the cooperative platform provided by T University, and the collaborative conduit role played by NPOC, together forming the Co-Creation Association. This alliance initially encompassed 16 NPOs and became deeply embedded in M Village's development system.

As a remote rural village in S City, M Village faced mediocre natural conditions, severe population aging, limited local resources, and a shortage of young talent. The Village Two

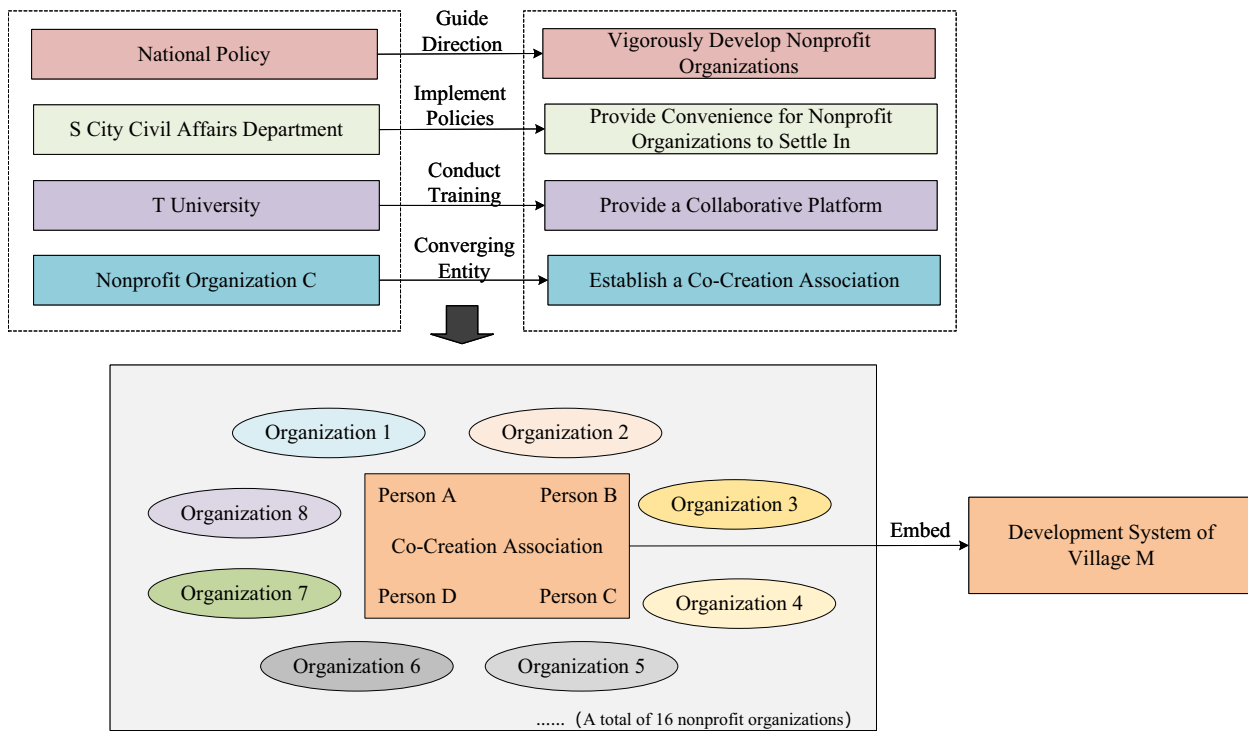


FIGURE 2 | The initial formation process and structure of interorganizational cooperation.

Committees struggled to find a development pathway.³ In early 2020, the Organization Department and the Agriculture and Rural Affairs Commission of S City dispatched 200 Resident Village Instructors to economically underdeveloped villages. Forty were assigned to District J, including Mr. Bo from the City Civil Affairs Bureau, who was stationed in M Village. His main challenge was how to address the lack of local resources:

What can I do here? Just five village officials aren't enough. Walk through a row of houses, and they're all elderly. You don't see young people in the fields, and there aren't any other resources available. (ZYB-20230215)⁴

Before founding her NPO, Ms. Zhou—the head of Organization C—was a sales agent specializing in imported golf carts for rural golf clubs. In 2018, she shifted her career toward public welfare and began participating in online and offline volunteer work. In 2019, she registered her own NPO in District J of S City, focusing on NPO incubation, rural–urban community development consulting, and digital community platform building. She recalls:

I really enjoy doing public service. Helping others brings me joy. After resigning, I thought about how to combine my past work with public welfare. That's when I wanted to do something related to rural assistance. I joined a training program, visited M Village, learned more about the situation, and

since the government was also promoting rural revitalization, I wanted to launch some projects there. (ZJJ-20230215)

In June 2021, Ms. Zhou brought 15 fellow NPO leaders from the training program to M Village. The Village Two Committees and Instructor Bo warmly welcomed them. After several meetings, they realized that bringing in NPOs could offer new possibilities for local development. Sixteen NPOs reached a preliminary cooperation agreement. On November 26, 2021, the “Practice Base for NPOs Supporting Rural Revitalization” was officially established in M Village.⁵ The village committee issued certificates appointing the NPO leaders as “Rural Revitalization Support Ambassadors.” The leaders expressed their commitment to leveraging their organizations' resources, expertise, and talent for the benefit of the village. This marked the formal beginning of cooperation among the NPOs.

4.1.2 | Cooperation Process: Resource Construction Under NAO

The early-stage cooperation among the 16 NPOs followed an NAO model. Facing internal resource constraints, Instructor Bo recognized the need for external actors to fill the gap. National policy provided guidance: in April 2021, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress passed the *Rural Revitalization Promotion Law*, which in Article 11 encouraged governments to support public organizations, NPOs, and enterprises in rural revitalization efforts. M Village seized this opportunity to explore new development paths via the nonprofit sector.

Municipal policy further reinforced this direction. In September 2021, the S City Civil Affairs Bureau issued *the Special Action Plan for High-Quality Development of Community NPOs*, aiming to cultivate active, credible, and influential organizations to drive rural progress. Another turning point was a training initiative implemented by the Public Welfare Development Institute of T University and supported by the City Civil Affairs Bureau. This program brought together high-quality NPOs from various fields. Leveraging this platform, Ms. Zhou was able to utilize both policy momentum and personal networks to form an organizational alliance, engage in dialog with M Village, and explore how NPO cooperation could be embedded into the village's development framework. This led to the formation of an administrative-type network of cooperation under the guidance of an authoritative actor.

In leading interorganizational cooperation, authoritative actors must construct foundational resources. The stationed rural advisor, in coordination with the Village Two Committees, worked to strengthen the cooperative framework within M Village and to institutionalize and plan for the long-term presence of NPOs in the village. Following the establishment of the *Practice Base for NPOs Supporting Rural Revitalization*, multiple NPOs and the advisor jointly proposed the formation of a Social Organization Steering Committee in M Village.

The Steering Committee aimed to standardize cooperation through formal institutional arrangements, focusing on two key dimensions. First, institutionalization was achieved through regulation and infrastructure: 16 NPOs were allocated permanent offices within the administrative building of the Village Two Committees. These offices provided shared space for cooperative planning and served as venues for project implementation. Second, legalization was pursued through official appointments: the Village Two Committees issued formal certificates to NPO personnel, thereby legitimizing their roles as rural revitalization assistants and enabling their long-term residency and operational continuity within the village.

The Steering Committee also regulated behavior and cooperative norms among the NPOs, enforcing accountability through democratic deliberation and voting. Mr. Yuan, a Steering Committee member and head of one participating NPO, remarked:

The purpose of setting up the Steering Committee is also to ensure our organizations don't act recklessly or jeopardize the village's interests. There are four of us: one advisor, one team leader, and two members. We monitor each other, vote democratically, and make decisions collectively to keep the committee functioning effectively. (YS-20230331)

4.1.3 | Outcomes of Cooperation: Achieving Structural Stability and Legitimacy Through Institutional Integration

Given their limited history and weak social influence, the NPOs in M Village faced significant uncertainty at the start of cooperation. Ms. Zhou, head of Organization C, summarized the challenges:

When we first formed the alliance, we lacked experience and professional depth—we admit that. Another big issue was how to resolve the legitimacy of our presence. Local governments and villagers had doubts or simply didn't understand NPOs, and some even distrusted us. (ZJJ-20230331)

To address these concerns and secure broad-based support, the 16 NPOs strategically leveraged administrative authority. Under the guidance of the rural advisor and the Village Committee, they formed an alliance under the banner of the *Practice Base for NPOs Supporting Rural Revitalization*. This enabled them to gain both structural stability and collaborative legitimacy through the symbolic and procedural endorsement of institutional actors, embedding their operations within the local development framework. With support from the publicity department of the City Civil Affairs Bureau, their collaborative work was featured on the front page of *Liberation Daily*, and received a directive from the Party Secretary of District J. The alliance's ability to assist local governance and generate political achievements made it welcomed by the local government, which, in turn, provided political resources—waiving annual rental, water, and electricity costs for participating NPOs.

As the NPO-led projects enhanced public visibility and brand reputation, they also received financial support from enterprises: Group W and Group H each contributed ¥500,000 in funds and materials. Additionally, the alliance's public service initiatives generated academic outcomes, gaining academic and think-tank resources from a research team at T University, which included quarterly project consultations and student innovation incubators. T University further partnered with M Village to establish a research center.

By aligning with national policy agendas and operating under institutional endorsement, the 16 NPOs successfully demonstrated their organizational stance, secured recognition from various stakeholders, and obtained political, financial, and academic support. These resources collectively ensured the legitimacy and effectiveness of their initial interorganizational cooperation.

4.2 | Stage Two: Deepening of Cooperation Among NPOs (December 2021—December 2022)

4.2.1 | Drivers of Cooperation Evolution: Avoiding Lock-In Effects From Administrative Resource Dependence

The cooperation initially led by administrative actors helped the 16 NPOs overcome resource limitations. However, they soon realized that excessive reliance on local administrative resources could lead to a rigid dependency trap. On one hand, the tangible resources provided by the government—such as venues and funding—were limited in supply. As cooperation expanded to the edge of what policy support could accommodate, competition for these resources threatened to undermine cooperation effectiveness.

On the other hand, if interorganizational cooperation became driven solely by alignment with government preferences for the sake of resource acquisition—rather than by addressing the village's actual needs and building unique service identities—this habitual dependence on administrative resources could erode the adaptability and developmental capacity of the cooperation itself. As Mr. Yuan, a member of the Social Organization Steering Committee, remarked:

The local government has given us significant support, but we also need to start seeking our own way forward—as a collective of 16 NPOs. One reason is to ensure future development for our alliance, and the other is to truly benefit the villagers. We don't want to make empty promises that sound impressive but deliver little. (YS-20230331)

Therefore, deeper cooperation was necessary. After internal discussion, the 16 NPOs agreed that future progress would require integrating existing resources and jointly developing branded collaborative projects to generate real impact—both for the alliance itself and for the development of M Village.

4.2.2 | Cooperation Process: Resource Bundling Under LON

Each participating NPO initially had different ideas regarding the creation of a project brand. After comprehensive deliberation, the 16 NPOs collectively selected Ms. Zhou, head of Organization C, as the central figure to lead the branding initiative. The decision was based on two factors: first, Ms. Zhou's extensive professional background gave her an edge in resource mobilization, project management, and leadership; second, she was the original initiator and convener of the NPO alliance. Acting as the “Project Manager,” Ms. Zhou launched and managed the “Love for JS Glutinous Corn”⁶ public welfare project, using her networks to strengthen inter-NPO collaboration and ensure effective project operations.

The original *Glutinous Corn* project had been a local agricultural initiative managed by the Resident Village Instructor and the Village Committee. Acting as intermediaries, they contracted 10 mu (approximately 1.6 acres) of land from local farmers for glutinous corn cultivation and handled unified procurement and external sales. Prior to the involvement of NPOs, the project was underperforming: the management of its entire value chain was limited to the Resident Village Instructor and a few village committee members, and farmers saw little improvement in their income.

On December 21, 2021, under the leadership of Organization C, the “Love for JS Glutinous Corn” initiative was officially launched as a public welfare project. NPOs comprehensively supported the original project's operations and management, turning the glutinous corn initiative into a fully socialized process covering production, sales, and community reinvestment. NPOs actively engaged in all stages—from cultivation, packaging to procurement—leveraging their professional strengths

and public service missions to create a closed-loop philanthropic model based on the corn project. Secretary Wang of M Village commented:

On one hand, this project helped farmers increase their income. On the other, a portion of the profits was used for public welfare programs to assist those in need. These NPOs effectively integrated their organizational resources into the corn project and gradually enhanced the brand's influence and value. (WJL-20221011)

As a result, the “Love for JS Glutinous Corn” brand, led by Organization C and supported by other participating NPOs, provided a steady source of funding for M Village's development. Unlike the earlier, administratively driven model led by institutional actors, this leadership-oriented network—with Organization C at its center—was better positioned to convert resources into sustainable collaborative momentum and internal drivers for local development. The alliance thus evolved into a leadership network, with Organization C responsible for coordinating interorganizational efforts, aggregating and harmonizing resources, and facilitating deep resource bundling before redistributing them to other organizations for project implementation.

In terms of funding, Organization C partnered with R Foundation to mobilize social resources—including both financial and human capital—for public welfare efforts. R Foundation, in cooperation with a local bank, established a dedicated agricultural assistance fund of RMB 300,000. Managed by the foundation, this fund supported charitable aid in M Village and sustained the operations and promotion of the glutinous corn project.

In terms of production and industry development, all 16 organizations jointly managed the entire lifecycle of the glutinous corn project, encompassing planting, processing, packaging, sales, and post-sale support. On the production end, one organization collaborated with the S City Academy of Agricultural Sciences to provide technical assistance in seed selection, cultivation methods, and crop maintenance. In the processing stage, an intermediary organization facilitated connections with professional agencies for packaging, brand registration, and product development. For the sales component, another organization coordinated with third-party distribution channels—including local food retailers, corporations, charity supermarkets, and universities—to centralize market access. By leveraging the resource advantages of S City as a megacity and the regional networks of the Yangtze River Delta, the initiative successfully expanded both online and offline sales, thereby generating sustainable income growth for participating farmers. The Resident Village Instructor, Mr. Bo, noted:

In the first round of the project, nearly 20,000 ears of glutinous corn were purchased, resulting in over 1300 boxes of finished products. This helped increase incomes for low-income households, cooperatives,

and the village collective. In February 2022, R Foundation reinvested RMB 97,391 in surplus funds from the previous round into the village. Beyond improving incomes for disadvantaged households, RMB 40,000 was allocated to welfare support programs, generating positive public welfare impact. Additionally, through the NPO alliance's consumer-based aid efforts, the project linked to multiple communities across S City. One farmer alone saw their annual income increase by more than RMB 10,000. (ZYB-2022202125)

4.2.3 | Outcomes of Cooperation: Enhanced Self-Sufficiency in M Village and Improved Quality of Life for Residents, and Further Consolidation of Inter-NPO Cooperation

With the support of interorganizational cooperation, M Village's "Love for JS Glutinous Corn" public welfare project achieved stable and effective operation. The project not only raised the income of disadvantaged farmers but also provided relatively stable financial support for the public service activities of the 16 participating NPOs. An evaluation survey on the involvement of the 16 NPOs in M Village's development revealed that the "Love for JS Glutinous Corn" project, led by Organization C, mobilized 15 other NPOs, more than 20 social workers and university student volunteers to engage in the planting, processing, packaging, and sale of glutinous corn.

Local farmers also acquired knowledge of glutinous corn cultivation techniques. In the first round, 40 disadvantaged households and other stakeholders received assistance—double the original target of 20. The second round of cultivation generated a net profit of over RMB 90,000, of which 80% was allocated to improving villagers' living conditions, and 20% was deposited into the special agricultural support fund.

Beyond income generation, the village also saw an increase in cultural and recreational public services, delivered by the cultural and sports-related NPOs among the 16 organizations. Overall, villagers reported a significant improvement in their satisfaction with the quality of life.

4.3 | Stage Three: The Expansion of Inter-NPO Cooperation (January 2023—Present)

4.3.1 | Drivers of Cooperative Evolution: Pressure From Practical Challenges and Opportunities From External Inspiration

The NPO cooperation led by Organization C generated a positive "chemical reaction" in M Village. However, reality is never a static blueprint. Following the relative success of the "Love for JS Glutinous Corn" project, during a development planning meeting in early January 2023, the Resident Village Instructor, Village Committee, and the 16 NPOs agreed to

double the corn cultivation area. This decision, however, forced the NPO cooperation to confront issues such as labor overload and professional specialization constraints. As Ms. Zhou noted:

Just coordinating with the agricultural research institute, managing packaging design, and handling sales channels already requires six full-time staff plus numerous volunteers and social workers. "Love for Jinshan Glutinous Corn" is our core project—you can't expect other organizations doing cultural events or community services to jump in. Now that the planting area has doubled, we simply can't manage it all. (ZJJ-20230311)

At the same time, trends like "livestream e-commerce" and the rise of "Village BA"⁷ basketball games in Taipan Village, Guizhou Province, sparked deeper reflection among the 16 organizations. They realized that relying solely on the "Love for JS Glutinous Corn" project was unsustainable. Instead, they needed to fully leverage each organization's strengths and diversify their initiatives.

Faced with mounting internal challenges and inspired by external innovations, the NPOs in M Village began to reevaluate their collaborative model. They recognized that only by activating the flow of resources, decentralizing authority, energizing all participants, and enriching project operations could they break through the current developmental constraints.

4.3.2 | Cooperation Process: Resource Utilization Under SGN

Based on a clear assessment of the current situation, the 16 NPOs made a strategic decision to transform their cooperation model and more effectively leverage their organizational resources:

First, a collaborative platform was established. In February 2023, the 16 NPOs jointly founded the "Love Together Community Innovation Center" (hereafter referred to as the TC Center) in M Village. The "Love for JS Glutinous Corn" project was fully transferred to the TC Center, with leadership shifting from Organization C to a tri-party structure consisting of Organizations A, B, and C.

Second, external social forces were mobilized. Acting as a linking hub and platform, the TC Center coordinated with the 16 NPOs to publish recruitment notices through their public communication channels (e.g., WeChat public accounts and official websites), inviting more like-minded NPOs with similar visions and missions to join.

Third, organizational coordination was used to initiate new project streams. For example, leveraging the specialty services of Organization D, the group launched "Village Super League" (Village Soccer) and "Village Idol" music events—modeled after China's professional soccer league and talent shows. These public

events—hosted under the M Village brand—drew broad participation while strengthening the village’s cultural identity. Organization E, in turn, launched parent–child education initiatives, organizing experiential rural-learning camps where urban families brought children to M Village to learn local customs or participate in hands-on corn harvesting. Staffing and funding were drawn from the NPO alliance, with costs shared by the initiating organizations and the R Foundation. As Village Secretary Wang noted:

Through signing a three-year agreement, they established the TC Center in M Village and initiated a series of major actions. In hindsight, it was the right move. Subsequently, several more organizations joined. By mid-2024, around 25 NPOs were either formally stationed in the village or affiliated in name. They launched one event after another, and M Village suddenly became bustling with activity. (WJL-20240312)

Thus, the NPO cooperation in M Village formally evolved into a shared-governance network. The shift among the 16 organizations enabled their resources to truly take root in the Village. By connecting with external organizations and individuals, they established internal-external “point-to-point” and “multipoint-to-one” networks of mutual assistance.

For instance, in the *Village Super League* project led by Organization D, they partnered with SH Soccer Club in S City. With support from the M Village agricultural assistance fund and SH Soccer Club’s donations, Organization D organized a public soccer event attracting wide participation from local fans. Public fundraising was conducted before and after the tournament, and proceeds were funneled back into the agricultural fund. This not only expanded M Village’s public funding pool but also allowed SH Club to fulfill its corporate social responsibility and gain widespread praise.

In addition, the TC Center emerged as a sustainable platform that both sustained NPO cooperation and fostered organizational development. Its public and inclusive nature enabled broader social mobilization beyond administrative structures. By bringing in more NPOs for horizontal cooperation in support of M Village, the partnership gradually reduced reliance on vertically embedded government bodies.

On one hand, the proven effectiveness of the NPOs earned the full trust of local authorities, leading to the complete transfer of the management rights for the “Love for JS Glutinous Corn” project to the NPOs. On the other hand, through the development of a public-interest brand and the distinctive presence of resident NPOs, M Village rose from the bottom to the top of the F Town investment ranking.

In this process, the cooperation among NPOs and the development of M Village became fully integrated. The resident NPOs achieved both independence and long-term sustainability. As Ms. Sun, one of the TC Center’s directors, remarked:

All social organizations in S City are welcome to join the TC Center. It has strong scalability and vast

potential. Through it, NPOs have built a diverse network of resource connections. Many project ideas that were once just concepts have now materialized here. Every organization acts as a center, actively seeking partners. The fruits of project incubation not only benefit M Village but also strengthen the NPOs themselves. (SQY-20230311)

4.3.3 | Outcomes of Cooperation: More Efficient Resource Flow, Greater Autonomy of Actors, and More Direct Benefits for M Village

The adoption of a shared-governance network shifted inter-NPO cooperation in M Village from “mechanical coordination” to “value cocreation”, with the outcomes evident in three major aspects:

First, the establishment of a tangible coordination hub and the innovation of a project reinvestment mechanism significantly increased the efficiency of resource flows among organizations. Acting as an interorganizational coordination platform, the TC Center precisely matched the distributed resources of the 16 NPOs to specific needs. For example, during the preparation for the *Village Super League* soccer tournament, Organization D swiftly mobilized Organization B’s volunteer team (in charge of event services), Organization F’s publicity resources (for local media outreach), and professional coaching resources from SH Soccer Club through the TC Center’s coordination mechanism. The entire process from planning to execution was completed within just 2 weeks. The gains in public fund circulation were even more striking: of the ¥300,000 raised through the event, 60% covered venue rental and prize incentives, while 40% was injected into the Agricultural Assistance Fund, which subsequently supported the launch of a parent–child learning program—forming a closed loop of “project-generated funding–fund expansion–new project incubation.”

Second, NPOs shifted their role from passive executors to active change-makers. Each organization expanded its operational scope according to its professional strengths. Organization D, leveraging its experience in sports event operations, independently designed and promoted the *Village Super League*, securing sponsorships from three businesses. Organization E focused on parent–child education by developing a “Field Classroom” curriculum and invited villagers to serve as farming mentors, transforming local knowledge into experiential learning products. This autonomy extended to resource allocation as well. Through the TC Center’s “Resource Exchange Ledger,” NPOs coordinated the flexible deployment of personnel and materials. For instance, during the glutinous corn harvest, Organization C temporarily borrowed three social workers from Organization A for packaging tasks. In return, Organization A received sound equipment from Organization C for its “Village Idol” music contest.

Third, the combination of short-chain benefit sharing and localized public service delivery allowed M Village and its

residents to enjoy more tangible benefits. The village's collective economic income surged from ¥800,000 in 2021 to ¥2,000,000 in 2023, with the average per capita disposable income of villagers doubling. Even more transformative was the change in the public service supply model: by combining government subsidies and the Agricultural Assistance Fund, villagers independently managed a newly renovated *Cultural and Sports Activity Center*, created by repurposing existing village facilities. Activities such as corn husk weaving and local portrait photography drew high participation from both residents and visitors. This rooted benefit model not only reshaped villagers' sense of belonging and identity but also fueled NPO sustainability—of the nine new organizations that entered M Village after mid-2023, four achieved financial balance through project revenue sharing.

5 | Discussion

5.1 | Unpacking the Black Box of Cooperation Among NPOs

The evolution of cooperation among NPOs in M Village shows a complex process of mutual domestication between structural tension and resource vitality. Cooperation is not a pre-designed institutional product, but a practical process jointly catalyzed by local development needs, organizational survival rationality, and external environmental changes (Liu and Van de Walle 2023). Its internal mechanism can be understood through the progressive chain of “motivations, processes, outcomes” (Gray and Wood 1991).

The resource vacuum in rural society and the mission-oriented nature of NPOs constitute the original driving force for interorganizational cooperation. In fact, resource scarcity and a shared vision among partners often serve as important incentives driving NPOs toward cooperation (Hung et al. 2025). The plight of M Village is typical. Labor loss due to aging, administrative resource limitations of the Village Two Committees, and the natural exclusion of market elements have trapped traditional rural development in an “involvement” cycle. Structural absenteeism forces institutional actors (stationed village instructors, the village's two committees) to break through bureaucratic inertia and seek “unconventional alliances” with social organizations (Platteau and Abraham 2002).

Driven by resource dependence and policy opportunities, nonprofits tend to seek government support through cooperative rather than confrontational approaches to advance their mission-oriented goals (Carré et al. 2025). Yet the deeper motivation lies in the resource rationality awakening of social organizations themselves. When NPO leaders realized that scattered philanthropic actions could not address systemic poverty, integrating their fragmented resources (professional knowledge, social capital, volunteer networks) into a cooperative community through policy opportunities became a necessary choice to overcome the survival bottleneck (Suykens et al. 2019). However, in politically sensitive fields, cross-sector collaborations often involve implicit tensions and conflicts. Nonprofits must carefully balance the opportunities afforded by collaboration against

potential compromises to their financial and ideological autonomy; otherwise, such collaboration may become a burden (Caló et al. 2024). At this point, cooperation is both a “have to” passive response and a “ready-to-go” active creation.

The formation of cooperation is essentially a dynamic rebalancing of organizational network power and resource flow. In the NAO stage, institutional actors use political empowerment to build an institutional framework for cooperation. However, this institutional patronage only addresses the legitimacy of interorganizational cooperation and does not address the core of resource-utilization efficiency.

The rise of the LON signifies the shift of power of resource control from administrative authority to professional expertise. Organization C, by leveraging project management skills and cross-boundary resource linking advantages, transformed glutinous corn from a low value-added agricultural product into a public welfare brand. This initiative demonstrates that NPO cooperation can significantly enhance the effectiveness of resource mobilization (Hesse and Boenigk 2025). By reshaping the value chain through resource bundling the cooperation of NPOs shifts from hierarchical radiation within institutional actors to single-nucleus leadership driven by NPOs themselves, with the resource orchestration logic evolving from policy-based resource construction to strategic resource bundling.

Yet, as organization projects expand, the structural vulnerability of a single organizational center becomes apparent. Personnel overload and professional barriers can threaten network sustainability, and the cooperation network thus faces a dilemma. Maintaining the scale effect of core projects while activating the innovation potential of fringe organizations becomes crucial. This also highlights a common challenge in long-term collaborative networks: the capacity constraints of core organizations can hinder the sustainability of collaboration, necessitating structural adjustments within the network to alleviate pressures and sustain collaborative vitality (Seo 2025).

Thus, the SGN form of organizational cooperation emerges. The establishment of the TC Center exemplifies this evolution, essentially driven by the combined effects of organizational network elasticity and resource liquidity. By transforming resource ownership into usage rights via physical cooperation platforms, NPOs initiated projects independently based on their expertise, while internal villagers and external stakeholders shifted from resource recipients to coproducers. This decentralized but central-focused form of cooperation preserves necessary coordination functions while unleashing the autonomy of network nodes, enabling organizational partnerships to balance between loose and tight cooperation (AbouAssi and Bies 2018).

In summary, effective cooperation is ultimately reflected in a triple-layer, nested value-addition framework of resources, subjects, and space. At the resource level, the organization's resource orchestration strategy has evolved from the simple addition of initial political capital and corporate donations to the feedback cycle of funds and the incubation of derivative projects, achieving a qualitative change from dissipative consumption to regenerative flow. At the subject level, social organizations

have transformed from policy implementation tools to sources of rural innovation, and villagers have transitioned from governance objects to cogovernance subjects. At the spatial level, M Village has transformed from a supported entity to a regional revitalization node, reshaping urban–rural resource-exchange channels through “Village Super League” and other symbolic practices.

The more far-reaching impact lies in the institutional spillover of the cooperation ecosystem. As the TC Center expands to include 25 NPOs, its significance goes beyond the revitalization of a single village. It has essentially created a new NPO relationship model of symbiosis instead of parasitism. The NPOs are not entirely dependent on the administrative system, nor do they blindly pursue marketization. Instead, they build a cooperative community with local entities through resource reciprocity and value consensus (Seo and Bryson 2022). The evolution of such a cooperative ecosystem also illustrates the nonprofit sector’s ambidexterity, simultaneously maintaining stable cooperation with government entities while fostering organizational innovation and autonomy (Seo et al. 2025).

The evolutionary trajectory of NPO cooperation in M Village makes a significant contribution to understanding network governance evolution. The three-stage progression identified in this study—shifting from NAO to LON and ultimately to SGN—not only illustrates the phased reconstruction of collaborative structures, but also challenges the unidirectional model proposed by Provan et al. (2011), which emphasizes a linear shift from decentralized to centralized governance. In contrast, our findings reveal a reverse evolution from centralization back to decentralization, aligning with Sydow’s (2004) concept of oscillating structures, wherein cooperation networks dynamically balance between organizational efficiency and participatory inclusiveness. Moreover, the observed redistribution of resource control among organizations, the transformation of cooperative roles, and the reconfiguration of governance modes further support Koza and Lewin’s (1998) theory of coevolution—suggesting that network evolution is not the product of a single actor’s strategy, but emerges from reciprocal adaptation and mutual shaping among interdependent organizations.

Finally, the practice of NPOs in M Village reveals that effective interorganizational cooperation comes from the mutual nesting and orchestration of cooperative networks and resources (see Figure 3). At the initial stage, the structural rigidity of NAO provides a protective container for resource integration. When

resource accumulation exceeds the structural-bearing threshold, the LON releases resource value through professional reorganization. Eventually, complex resource flow demands force the network to evolve toward SGN. These three types of cooperative networks exhibit not only a progressive evolutionary relationship but also distinct differences in their underlying mechanisms (See Table 2). The recursive interaction between structure and resources enables NPO cooperation to resist initial uncertainties and maintain endogenous dynamism. In essence, it blazes a third path between order and vitality through continuous adjustments in cooperative structures and innovation in interorganizational resources.

5.2 | Contributions

This study offers both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, it explores how NPOs achieve effective cooperation by constructing network structures and resource orchestration capabilities. Tracking the case reveals three key insights: First, cooperation among NPOs is not solely based on resource complementarity. Core organizations strategically arrange cooperative power structures to build a core-periphery network topology. Second, resource orchestration, as a dynamic capability in organizational cooperation, adopts different strategies in various cooperation stages, offering a micro-mechanism to explain cooperation sustainability. Third, by combining the Chinese context with classical collaboration theories, the study shows how policy-driven social issues (e.g., rural revitalization) reshape the goal-anchoring and legitimacy-acquisition paths of NPO cooperation networks through political opportunity structures.

The practical contributions of this study lie in providing useful guidance on how NPOs should cooperate and how such cooperation can be effective. The selected case of NPO cooperation in M Village for rural governance spans a considerable time period, allowing for observation of the evolving effectiveness of NPO cooperation at different development stages. Therefore, NPO managers are advised to adopt different strategies in different stages: initially leveraging NAO to establish legitimacy, then building resource-allocation capacity through professional projects, and later activating distributed innovation via cooperation coordination platforms. They also need to transform the project beneficiaries from mere recipients into cooperators to ensure cooperation sustainability through local participation. This study ultimately shows that nonprofit cooperation is an “art of

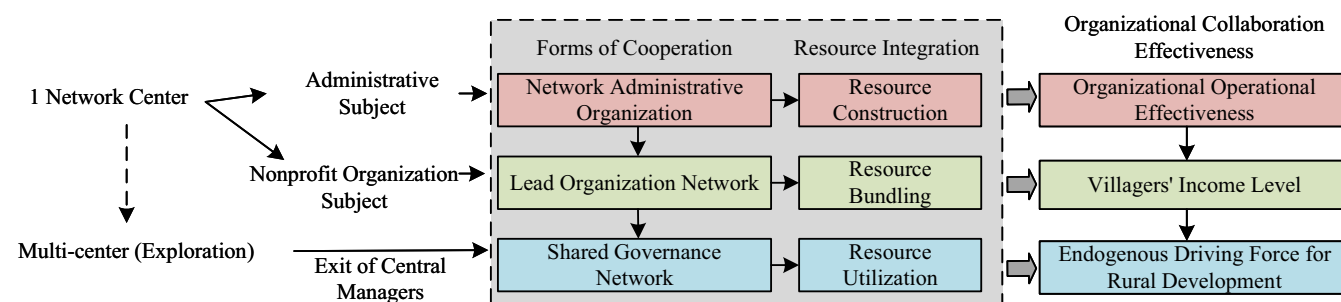


FIGURE 3 | The dynamic evolution process of NPOs cooperation.

TABLE 2 | Comparative features of inter-NPO cooperation networks.

Network structure/form	Network administrative organization	Lead organization network	Shared governance network
Governing entity	Independent administrative agency appointed by the government	Lead organization or core member organization (nongovernment-led)	All members participate collectively
Cooperation approach	Top-down administrative coordination	Lead organization-led coordination; other members participate through consultation	Horizontal collaboration and coininitiative among members
Resource provider	Government as the primary resource provider	Lead organization coordinates resource allocation; resources may come from multiple sources	Resources mainly provided by members themselves; some may be sourced externally
Applicable conditions	Requires strong policy push (e.g., regional development planning, public infrastructure construction)	Requires lead organization with professional coordination capacity	Requires high self-organization capacity and openness to collaborative innovation

Source: Provan and Kenis (2008).

structural power concession and resource orchestration.” Only by balancing structural elasticity and resource liquidity can the dual goals of benefiting external stakeholders and strengthening the organization internally be achieved. Finally, given that government agencies (like civil affairs departments and poverty alleviation offices) can influence the initial structure of cooperation networks of NPO by means of policy tools such as registration permits, project approval, and funding support, policymakers should realize that the evolution of NPO cooperation will not be constrained by original institutional design and should accommodate the supplementary but autonomous role of NPOs in public service delivery.

5.3 | Limitations

This study also has certain limitations: First, while the cooperation between NPOs in M Village has achieved significant success, the replicability and transferability of its cooperation mechanism remain uncertain. The development of NPOs in S City is relatively fast and high-quality; whether NPO cooperation in other regions can reach a comparable level is unclear. Therefore, the generalizability of the conclusions from a single case study needs further validation. Second, the cooperation between NPOs requires sustained support from public resources. Whether NPOs on a larger scale, and even transnationally, can consciously take collective action to promote value cocreation among organizations needs further exploration.

6 | Conclusion

This four-year longitudinal study of nonprofit cooperation in M Village, S City, China, reveals the formation and evolution logic of rural nonprofit cooperation: the stepwise adjustment of network centrality—from administrative empowerment to professional focus and then to value creation—paired with

the strategic innovation of resource orchestration, progressing from building policy-based legitimate resources to deeply bundling resources among organizations and then to decentralized resource utilization. Together, these mechanisms underpin the process of cooperation from formation through deepening to diffusion. For nonprofit management and leadership in China’s system, the key point is to move beyond the one-sided thinking of “resource determinism” or “structure determinism.” Instead, structural design should match resource vitality, and resources should drive structural evolution.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

¹The so-called “dual management system” requires NPOs to register with the civil affairs department while simultaneously relying on a qualified supervisory body (such as a government department or industry association) to provide operational guidance and oversight. This model not only secures the legal legitimacy of NPOs but also, through the supervisory body’s day-to-day regulation and guidance, standardizes their program activities and financial management.

²In China, resident village instructors are appointed by local Party committees to work at the grassroots level, such as in villages and communities. Their role is to provide guidance and support for local development. Their primary responsibilities include working directly with local residents, addressing practical challenges, advancing local initiatives, maintaining social stability, and fostering sustainable economic development.

³The “Village Two Committees” (referred to as the “Two Committees”) are organizational bodies established at the administrative village level, which is subordinate to townships or subdistricts. They consist

of the Village Party Branch Committee and the Village Committee. The Village Party Branch Committee is elected by the village's Party members through the Party members' assembly for a term of 2–3 years, and typically includes a Party Secretary (commonly known as the “Village Secretary”), a Deputy Secretary, and several Committee Members. The Party Branch provides political leadership over the Village Committee and oversees local development and governance. The Village Committee is a mass-based self-governance organization elected by village residents through democratic elections, and assists the township government in implementing its work. It generally consists of a Village Director (commonly known as the “Village Head”), a Deputy Director, and several Committee Members.

⁴Interview Data Coding Rule: The code consists of the interviewee's initials in pinyin followed by the interview date. For example, ZYB-20230215 refers to an interview conducted with ZYB on February 15, 2023.

⁵In January 2022, the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China and the National Administration for Rural Revitalization jointly issued the *Notice on Mobilizing and Guiding Social Organizations to Participate in Rural Revitalization*, which called for social organizations to play active roles in areas such as rural industrial development, agricultural technology support, cultural and sports programs, environmental protection, healthcare, social governance, and livelihood security. Across the country, various localities have been actively promoting the involvement of social organizations in rural development. The establishment of the Practice Base for NPOs Supporting Rural Revitalization in M Village of S City was the first of its kind in China, attracting close attention from governments in other regions and major state media.

⁶JS is a place name.

⁷In July and August 2022, Taipan Village in Taipan Township, Qiongdongnan Prefecture, Guizhou Province, hosted the Guizhou “Beautiful Countryside” Basketball Tournament. This annual local basketball event went viral across China through short video platforms. Netizens, drawing inspiration from the term “NBA,” dubbed it the “Village BA” of Guizhou. The popularity of “Village BA” continued into 2023, with similar tournaments being held not only in Guizhou, but also in Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Liaoning, Jilin, Heilongjiang, Jiangsu, Shandong, and other regions.

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