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Discussion Paper

Revisiting Institutionalization in Civil Society Organizations: The Necessity of Informalization in Extreme Contexts

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Abstract

While institutionalization has traditionally been viewed as essential for organizational legitimacy, the process has often led to the rigidification and NGOization of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), aligning them more closely with donor agendas and reducing their responsiveness to local needs in extreme context. The study introduces informalization as a strategic response to these challenges, proposing it as a means for CSOs to reclaim their flexibility, adaptability, and community-driven focus in times of crises. By analyzing the unique context of PCSOs operating under Israeli occupation, the research highlights the relevance of informalization in enhancing organizational resilience, fostering innovative solutions, and maintaining a bottom-up approach in governance. The findings suggest that informalization, driven by community governance, social innovation, and sustainable organizational transformation, can help organizations re-institutionalize over time by moving beyond a purely technical focus and integrating values and practices into their work.

Keywords: CSOs, Institutional theory, Palestine, Extreme contexts, Governance, Knowledge, Social Innovation

1 Introduction

Institutional theory has long viewed institutionalization as a dynamic process that evolves over time, embedding an organization's history, people, stakeholders, and interests (Scott, 2008). According to Selznick (2011), institutionalization goes beyond merely meeting technical requirements; it infuses an organization with values that shape its identity, character, and purpose. Selznick also recognized that institutionalization is not a one-size-fits-all concept but varies in degree based on an organization's defined goals and technologies. However, within the context of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), institutionalization often fails to transcend technical objectives. Instead, it becomes confined to rigid governing structures, shifting from horizontal, board-led organizations to more vertical,

professionalized roles (Lang, 2012). This shift aligns CSOs with governmental practices, focusing primarily on efficiency and compliance rather than the broader values and missions that originally defined them (Harwood and Creighton, 2008). This contrast raises critical questions about the true purpose of institutionalization in CSOs: Is it a means to preserve organizational values and identity, or has it become a tool for bureaucratization and professionalization, which is known as a process of NGOization (Lang, 2012), for donors and governments?

In extreme contexts—situations marked by high levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, and complexity, where traditional rules and norms may not apply (Barin Cruz et al., 2016)—the institutional environment is destabilized by institutional voids, complexity, and harsh operating conditions (Barin Cruz et al., 2016; Jarzabkowski et al., 2013; Mair and Marti, 2009). This volatile environment often leads to inflexible institutional practices, where the norms and regulations set by governments and donors become hindrances rather than support mechanisms in such extreme settings (Al Jayousi and Nishide, 2024; Morrar and Baba, 2022). Consequently, CSOs struggle with limited responsiveness and effectiveness during crises, which ultimately jeopardizes their survival.

Institutionalized CSOs have been accused of aligning more closely with the agendas of governments and donors, leading to increased dependence on aid (Atia and Herrold, 2018; Arda and Banerjee, 2021). Furthermore, they have faced allegations of serving as tools to propagate neoliberal ideology, effectively perpetuating cultural and economic colonialism (Ismail and Kamat, 2018; Choudry and Kapoor, 2013). As a result of these shifts, CSOs have adopted a more market-driven approach, emphasizing technical solutions to societal problems (Srinivas, 2009). This trend has resulted in the de-politicization of CSOs, dampening dissent and resistance (Tartir and Seidel, 2019) and contributing to the fragmentation of social issues and the actors seeking change (Zencirci and Herrold, 2022). Moreover, CSOs have faced challenges in maintaining legitimacy and accountability (Brown, 2008), particularly those reliant on aid, which are increasingly perceived as instruments of governance, subject to the agendas and power dynamics of donors (Atia and Herrold, 2018).

Despite extensive literature over the past two decades on NGOization and its risks, this phenomenon continues to dominate CSOs worldwide, largely due to a lack of viable alternatives. While studies in regions like Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe have highlighted the limitations of NGOization and explored ways of dealing with NGOizaiton, a significant gap remains in guiding CSOs on how to effectively move beyond NGOization, particularly in contexts marked by high aid dependency, entrenched NGO structures, and historical legacies of conflict.

This study seeks to reexamine the concept of institutionalization from both an institutional and managerial perspective, exploring how it can be transformed from a foreign, technically imposed framework into a natural process that reflects the unique identity, values, and structures of CSOs over time. To achieve this, the study introduces the concept of informalization, proposing it as a

key strategy for CSOs to counteract the rigidities of institutionalization in extreme, volatile environments. The central research question guiding this study is: *How can CSOs effectively respond to rigid institutionalization in such extreme contexts and reverse the process of NGOization?*

The study focuses on the case of Palestinian Civil Society Organizations (PCSOs) where they operate under the Israeli settler colonialism and occupation since 1967 and currently a 11-month war on the Gaza Strip. The study of PCSOs addresses the research question, emphasizing the relevance of Jad (2004) concept of NGOization, which critiques the professionalization and co-optation of Palestinian and Arab women's movements. Jad argues that the current NGO structure often prioritizes top-down approaches and donor accountability, hindering sustainable development and failing to address local needs. This critique remains relevant, as NGOization has evolved into a global phenomenon, extending beyond Palestine to the broader Arab world (Jacobsson and Saxonberg, 2016; Al Jayousi and Nishide, 2024). The significance of studying PCSOs lies in their unique context shaped by over 57 years of Israeli occupation, which has influenced their resilience strategies and highlighted the concept of *Sumud*, or steadfastness, as a form of resistance (Marie et al., 2018). However, much of the research on Palestine has resulted in "grey literature" with little impact, leading to mistrust among Palestinians (Challand, 2008; Sukarieh and Tannock, 2013; de Bárcena Myrsep, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative to contextualize the findings within political and social frameworks, particularly in light of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, which underscores the importance of engaged scholarship and collaboration between academics and practitioners (Van de Ven, 2007). This case study of PCSOs offers valuable insights into the broader phenomenon of NGOization and its implications for civil society in extreme contexts.

2 Literature review: Defining Informalization

Informalization emerges as a critical response to the inefficiencies and pressures of institutionalization, particularly within CSOs operating in extreme and volatile environments. The concept of informalization, although not explicitly defined in earlier institutional theory, has roots in the work of Meyer and Simsa (2018), who discussed how organizations often maintain informal, flexible practices to adapt to practical needs despite the rigidities of formal institutional structures. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) further elaborated on this dual approach, emphasizing how organizations conform to formal structures for legitimacy while retaining informal practices internally to ensure efficiency and adaptability. Greenwood and Hinings (1996) extended these ideas by highlighting the interplay between organizational context and internal dynamics, including informal structures, as pivotal in achieving radical organizational change. Recent studies, such as those by Andersson (2022) and Waerder et al. (2022), underscore the importance of informal practices in helping non-profits evolve, adapt, and build resilience, particularly in response to extreme events.

SO to define informalization, *it is a process by which organizations deliberately adopt informal practices, networks and structures to enhance flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness in response to institutional rigidity or extreme environmental conditions.* This process involves reducing formalization to create a more dynamic and resilient organizational framework capable of effectively managing crises and adapting to rapid changes in their context.

Despite the implicit recognition of informal practices in the literature, the concept of informalization as a deliberate organizational strategy remains underexplored. This gap can be attributed to three main reasons. First, informalization is often associated with unprofessionalism, messiness, and disorganization, particularly during an organization's nascent stages, leading to its perception as a regression rather than a sustainable strategy. The case of Palestinian CSOs exemplifies this, where coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism forced these organizations to adopt formal structures to comply with donor requirements and gain legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Second, informalization is typically viewed as a temporary or transitional phase rather than a long-term organizational approach. Organizations often aim for formalization to secure legitimacy, even if they continue to rely on informal practices beneath the surface (Andersson, 2022; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Third, informalization is challenging to define, measure, or evaluate using standard metrics, making it less attractive for academic research. The difficulty in quantifying informal practices has led to an oversight of their nuanced and context-specific benefits, leaving a significant gap in the literature.

This study seeks to bridge this gap by theorizing informalization as a process in which organizations deliberately adopt informal practices, structures, and networks to enhance flexibility, adaptability, and operational efficiency. Informalization is particularly relevant in response to rigid institutional environments, extreme contexts, nascent organizational stages, or as a long-term strategy for building organizational resilience and maintaining a bottom-up approach within the organizational base. Unlike formal organizations, which earn legitimacy through professionalization and structured hierarchy, informal organizations gain legitimacy through merit-based measures, evaluated by their social base and the effectiveness of their services. Informalization, therefore, represents a more dynamic, context-specific, and resilient organizational framework capable of effectively managing crises and adapting to rapid changes in their operational environment. By redefining informalization in this way, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how CSOs can navigate and thrive within the constraints of institutionalization and NGOization, offering a new perspective on organizational adaptability and resilience.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

The rationale for adopting a single case study is to delve deeply into the nuanced details within the specific and intricate context of PCSOs operating under Israeli occupation (Todres and Galvin, 2005). A single-case study allows for an in-depth exploration, focusing on the richness of contextual information (Patton, 2002). Previous research on Palestinian civil society has similarly utilized such designs (Morrar and Baba, 2022; Arda and Banerjee, 2021; Harrow and Sola, 2022).

This study adopts a concurrent triangulation design that involves separate collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data, with primary focus on qualitative methods to gain a deeper understanding of the research (Creswell and Clark, 2017; Morse, 1991). Qualitative methodology proves particularly apt for studying exploratory and under-explored phenomena, hence its usage as the main methodology of this study (Patton, 2002). Concurrently, quantitative methodology is integrated into a triangulation design as a secondary triangulation method, enabling the collection and analysis of distinct data sets on the same topic (Creswell and Clark, 2017; Morse, 1991). This approach allows for separate analysis of qualitative and quantitative data, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation and ensuring data triangulation of qualitative data (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Subsequently, the findings from both data sets are merged through interpretation. This case study can be considered unique or extreme due to the protracted Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which has endured for decades and is specific to Palestine (Yin, 2009). This uniqueness is deemed a strength as it provides insights into individual experiences and interpretations (Bluhm et al., 2011). Despite its distinctive nature, the author argues that some of the findings can offer transferable insights applicable to other similar contexts, such as war-torn or fragile states (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Moreover, due to the adversity faced by Palestinians, the context may compromise the external validity such unique contexts provide rich insights into complex social phenomena by uncovering underlying factors and mechanisms, as well as human experiences (Stake, 1995). The author suggests that some of the general overarching concepts can offer transferable insights that can be applied in other extreme contexts, with tweaks and modifications to fit their specific missions and environments. Additionally, it was found that qualitative research in complex and evolving contexts, particularly in the case of Palestine, demands a nuanced and reflexive approach, highlighting the potential for such research to yield valuable insights and contribute to broader understandings within the social sciences (Kacen and Chaitin, 2006).

3.2 Empirical Material

A dual qualitative approach was employed to enhance the research's depth and robustness, ensuring data triangulation and theoretical rigor (Patton, 2002). First, an exhaustive documentary analysis was conducted, covering materials such as books, reports, policy documents, and databases from CSOs, shedding light on PCSOs' organizational structures and historical contexts. This approach deepened the understanding of PCSOs' roles and impacts. The second qualitative method involved 30 semi-structured interviews with top and team management across 23 CSOs, allowing for flexible, in-depth discussions (Bryman, 2016). The interviews, mostly conducted in Arabic with participants' consent for recording, provided a safe space for critical perspectives. Interviews took place in two periods: February to April 2022 and September 2023 to January 2024, with 19 male and 11 female participants. In the quantitative phase, a 51-question survey was developed, covering key dynamics and organizational details. The survey, cross-validated by experts and offered in Arabic and English, was completed by 18 participants between February and April 2022, following best practices for questionnaire design (Dillman et al., 2014).

3.3 Data Analysis

The study employed a concurrent triangulation design, utilizing both thematic analysis and descriptive statistics to co-interpret the data. Qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed separately, with their results merged through co-interpretation. Descriptive statistics identified patterns based on response frequencies, while thematic analysis provided deeper insights through a five-phase iterative process. This process began with data familiarization, followed by the development of codes to capture meaningful data interpretations (Clarke and Braun, 2021). In addition to thematic analysis, directed content analysis was used to identify knowledge sources for ID organizations, following Powell (2006) framework. This method combined pre-coded themes from existing theories with archival resources and interview transcripts. Encodable data were analyzed to determine if they represented new categories, aligning with a critical realist approach (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). These combined approaches provided a comprehensive understanding of governance dynamics, social innovation, knowledge sharing and service provision as well as policy dialogue within the organizations studied.

4 Findings

The results of or thematic analysis show that there it is evident that the process of informalization of CSOs can be driven by three key strategic pillars: Community Driven Governance, Innovative Knowledge Sharing, and Sustainable Organizational Transformation. Each of these strategic pillars is aimed at demonstrating what makes informalization work and identifying which dynamics are

important in addressing this transition. Each pillar of these facilitate the process of informalization, ensuring that CSOs are resilient adaptive and deeply connected to their community.

4.1 The Process of Informalization

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Community Driven Governance focuses on the involvement of CSO constituents in decision-making processes both internally and externally but also allows efficient responses and structural flexibility. The aim of this pillar is for CSOs that informalize to be not only transparent and accountable but also to engage with the community informally through informal networks, horizontal organizational structures, inclusive internal governance structures, decentralized governance, and active policy dialogue. This will help CSOs get support and guidance from their community and stakeholders enhance transparency and improve local trust. Key dynamics within this pillar include:

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Internal Governance: Ensuring more transparent and inclusive general assemblies, with memberships accessible to the public, can lead to increased oversight of the board of directors and a more diverse board capable of developing strategies that are responsive to community needs. This approach promotes shared ownership and encourages the involvement of community members in decision-making processes.

External Governance and Policy Dialogue: Informalization does not imply severing connections with donors or the government. Instead, it necessitates reformulating these relationships to achieve a more balanced, bottom-up approach. This can be accomplished through balanced power dynamics, wherein CSOs form networks and alliances to enhance their collective impact and negotiating power with donors, while sharing resources, knowledge, and best practices. CSOs are also expected to maintain a constructive yet critical relationship with the government to foster civic space and manage donor relationships effectively. Building trust with donors involves encouraging them to take calculated risks based on outcomes rather than mere reporting. Establishing balanced relationships with all stakeholders provides the necessary leverage for effective policy dialogue.

Decentralization and Horizontal Structures: While this is not specifically a dynamic implementing decentralized governance both internally and externally is crucial. Internally, this promotes bottom-up decision-making and reduces bureaucratic constraints through horizontal organizational structures through local committees and clusters. Externally, it involves engaging local communities and stake-holders in governance processes by sharing with them governance responsibilities, thereby fostering greater responsibility, inclusivity and responsiveness.

4.1.2 Social Innovation and Knowledge Sharing

Social Innovation and Knowledge Sharing constitute the dynamic core of informal CSOs operating in extreme contexts. Social innovation endows CSOs with the adaptability necessary for organizational resilience, particularly in conflict settings, by devising unique, context-specific solutions leveraging community resources and capacities. Implementing these tailored solutions within communities not only addresses local challenges effectively but also facilitates the dissemination of this knowledge to other CSOs and communities, thereby enhancing mobilization and gaining trust from the community, donors, and government. Key dynamics within this pillar include:

Social Innovation: This involves encouraging community-led projects that address local challenges through innovative solutions, thus providing legitimacy and offering sustainable, cost-effective solutions. Social innovation requires flexible governance structures and robust local partnerships to succeed. By fostering a culture of innovation, CSOs can address complex social issues more effectively.

Knowledge Sharing: Effective knowledge sharing relies on establishing and maintaining intra- and inter-organizational structures for the exchange of best practices, local ideas, assessments, and innovations. This collaborative approach not only fosters resilience but also encourages collective learning and innovation. Knowledge sharing enhances the ability of CSOs to develop new capabilities and improve their processes and services in response to changing environments and social needs.

Knowledge Resilience: Knowledge resilience refers to the ability of an organization to utilize existing knowledge generated through social innovation and knowledge sharing. This capability ensures that organizations can not only sustain and leverage existing knowledge but also adapt and generate new knowledge systems in response to evolving environments and challenges. It involves continuous learning and the integration of new insights into the organizational framework.

4.1.3 Sustainable Organizational Transformation

To sustain informal CSOs in the long term, there is a need for the remobilization of civil society and the adoption of organizational resilience as well as collective *Sumud*. This requires services that are not only innovative but also built on political ideology. In the case of Palestinian CSOs, this means not only resilience for survival but also the end of the occupation and liberation. This pillar addresses

the need for CSOs to not only adapt to changing environments but also actively engage in political and social protests and advocacy to drive long-term sustainable development. Key dynamics within this pillar include:

Community Mobilization: Effective community mobilization is critical for sustainable organizational transformation. CSOs must actively engage and mobilize community members to participate in decision-making processes and advocacy efforts. This fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment within the community, enhancing the organization's legitimacy and impact. Mobilization strategies should leverage local knowledge, build on existing social networks, and promote active citizenship.

Integration of Sumud into services: *Sumud*, or steadfastness, is a key cultural concept that embodies resilience and perseverance in the face of adversity. Integrating *Sumud* into the organizational framework of CSOs involves fostering a collective identity and solidarity among community members. Services with the aim of *Sumud* will support community perseverance but also mobilize towards the end of occupation. Emphasizing *Sumud* helps CSOs maintain their focus on long-term goals and mobilize community towards their political re-engagement.

4.2 The Process of Informalization

Figure 1 illustrates the process of informalization from a NGOized organization to a community-driven CSO. The process begins with the implementation of decentralized and horizontal governance structures to enhance the flexibility, responsiveness, and efficiency of the CSO. This approach aims to integrate members of society into the decision-making processes both within the organization and in the broader community. By distributing decision-making authority through local communities and clusters, the organization ensures an active board of directors that is diverse and representative of various geographical locations. Decentralized governance, rooted in social contexts, prioritizes local problem-solving, enabling different communities to address their issues collaboratively through social innovation. This approach leverages local capacities to ensure sustainability and suitability. Successful models can be shared, utilized, and adapted for future use, fostering continuous improvement among CSOs and their communities. This dynamic and iterative process generates resilient knowledge, enhancing organizational resilience. The integration of the concept of *Sumud* into service delivery embeds the collective national goal of social resilience into CSO operations. Services are designed with liberation in mind, re-engaging and mobilizing Palestinians into political action. This strengthens the backbone and trust in CSOs, providing them with long-term political power against the Israeli occupation, shrinking civic space, donors, and the Palestinian Authority. Ultimately, this process leads to reduced dependency on external actors such as donors and foreign governments, fostering greater self-reliance and empowerment within Palestinian communities.
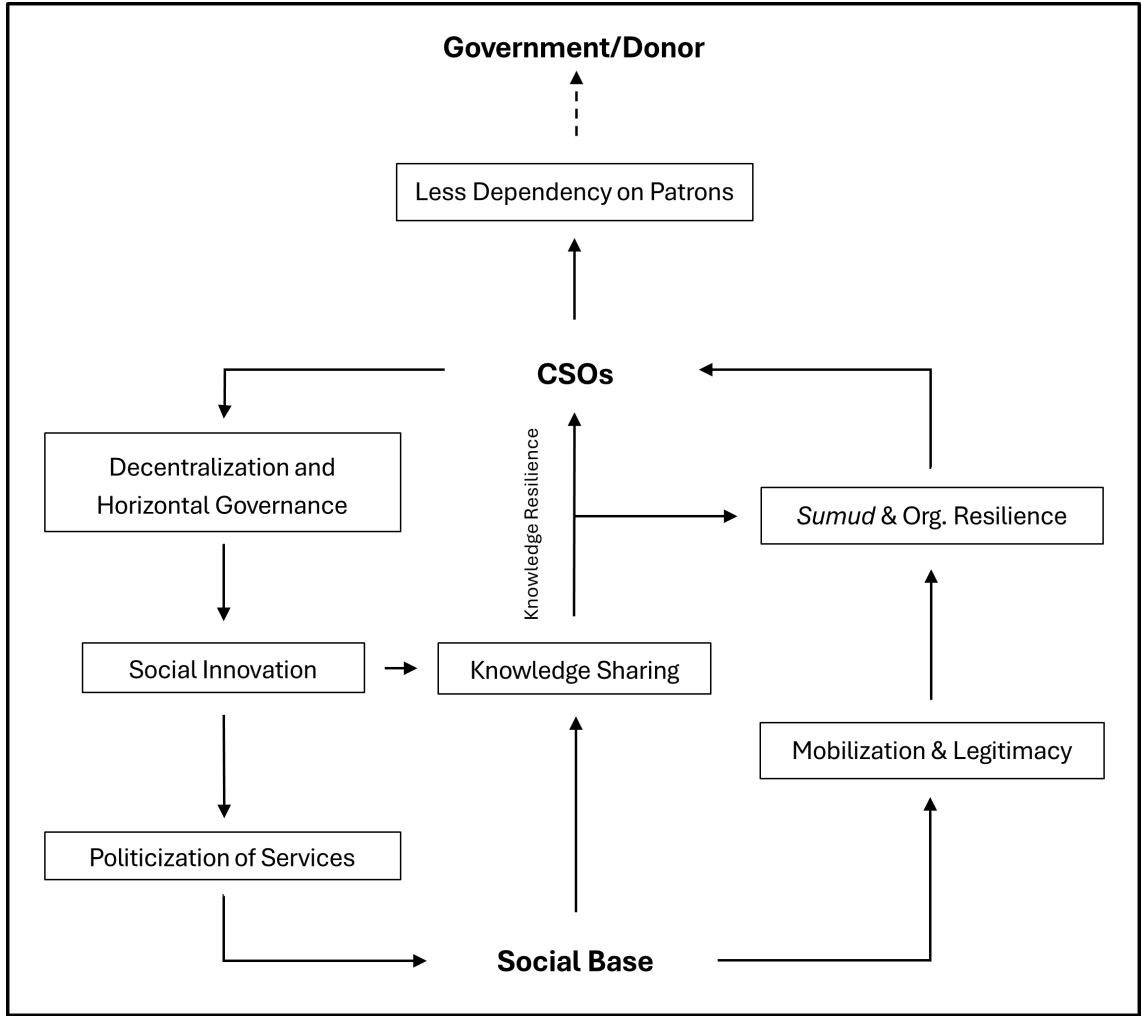
Fig. 1: Process Model for Informalization

4.3 A Real Life Case: RAWA

RAWA, whose slogan is "For liberatory, resilient Palestinian community work" (Rawa, 2024), was founded in 2018 by former NGO workers disillusioned by the restrictive and conditional nature of traditional aid, which they found stifling to vision, discourse, objectives, management methods, and work culture. RAWA's mission is to provide social initiatives with flexibility, trust, and partnership, focusing on societal capabilities, resources, agency, and independence through participatory grant-making, where donors share grant-making power with beneficiaries. The organization employs decentralized governance structures, including advisory boards and local and regional clusters. Their 2024 plan aimed to "intensify collaboration with initiatives, learn with and from them, and be creative in developing our financial and organizational structures toward independence" (Rawa, 2024). In June 2024, RAWA highlighted its operational priorities post-Gaza war, emphasizing flexibility to increase resilience despite disruptions and a lack of pre-allocated funding. They addressed urgent needs such as water desalination, solar energy, food, and tent construction, while building trust in

initiative leaders and their adaptive capabilities. RAWA has actively resisted international donors who weaponize aid to suppress support for Gaza, creating a fund to support Palestinian institutions that reject conditional aid and developing strategies for mobilizing collectives against malicious foreign funding. The practical application of informalization is evident in RAWA's response to the war, as many donors withdrew funding for political reasons, reinforcing RAWA's focus on flexibility, trust, and independence. Their approach, which emphasizes innovative thinking, collaboration, and knowledge sharing, aligns with the studies main findings, making RAWA a notable example of mobilization, independence, and de-NGOization in the Palestinian context.

5 Discussion

5.1 Implications for Institutional theory

This paper advances institutional theory by introducing informalization as a strategic response to the rigidities of traditional institutionalization processes. Informalization is conceptualized as a dynamic, context-specific, and resilient organizational framework that enhances adaptability, efficiency, and legitimacy for CSOs, particularly in extreme contexts such as conflict zones. Traditional institutional theory, as discussed by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and Meyer and Rowan (1977), emphasizes formal structures, rules, and norms in shaping organizational behavior and legitimacy through coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism. However, these formal structures often lead to inefficiencies and hinder adaptability, especially in volatile environments. Informalization offers an alternative by emphasizing operational efficiency, flexibility, and community-driven governance, aligning with Waerder et al. (2022) focus on organizational resilience in extreme contexts. Studies by Pache and Santos (2013) and Powell et al. (2005) support the notion that informal practices can enhance adaptability and innovation. This study challenges the traditional link between formalization, professionalization, and effectiveness by demonstrating that informalization can achieve operational efficiency and effectiveness through merit-based legitimacy, encouraging a reevaluation of professionalization in institutional contexts. Insights from Lawrence et al. (2009) on institutional work further support this argument, emphasizing the role of actors in shaping and transforming institutional contexts. Additionally, informalization contributes to the discourse on social innovation and knowledge sharing, enabling CSOs to leverage local knowledge and foster collaborative problem-solving, as explored by Tina Dacin et al. (2002) and Garud et al. (2007). Informal organizations gain legitimacy through their effectiveness and responsiveness to community needs, contrasting with formal organizations that rely on professionalization. This shift broadens the understanding of how organizations can gain and maintain legitimacy in diverse contexts. Informalization addresses power imbalances and dependencies created by donor-driven institutionalization, promoting self-reliance and reducing

dependency on external actors. This theoretical advancement enriches academic discourse and offers practical implications for designing and managing resilient and adaptive organizations in extreme contexts.

5.2 Implications for CSO Practitioners

A recurring concern among interviewed CSO representatives is that many Western tools and frameworks are ill-suited to the Palestinian context, resulting in excessive reporting requirements that detract from fieldwork and are often tied to short-term funding. However, this issue was not as pronounced in CSOs established before 1995, as these organizations had institutionalized organically before the arrival of international donors and the Palestinian government. These CSOs were able to integrate practices and values that were inherently aligned with their communities and organizational identities, leading to fewer conflicts with donor expectations. The key lesson here is the importance of allowing CSOs to institutionalize independently over time, without succumbing to external pressures that force them to artificially adopt institutional practices. Such pressures can erode the organization's values, identity, and trust within the community. RAWA is a leading example, prioritizing the development of its own structures and values while innovating governance methods that emphasize flexibility, responsiveness to disasters, and perseverance to essential elements in extreme contexts. Thus, informalization is not a step back from institutionalization; rather, it is a revisiting of institutionalization in a way that transcends technical rigidity, prioritizing the localization of practices, solutions, and social values.

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