

Nonprofit crisis responses and the reproduction of systemic inequities: an autopoietic ecology account of neutrality failure

Vladislav Valentinov

Department of Structural Change,

*Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies,
Halle, Germany;*

*Department of Law and Economics, Martin Luther University Halle Wittenberg,
Halle, Germany and*

*Next Society Institute, Kazimieras Simonavicius University,
Vilnius, Lithuania, and*

Gabriela Daniel

*Department of Economics, Economic Policy and Public Administration,
Ambis University, Praha, Czech Republic*

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Abstract

Purpose – Neutrality has been upheld as a guiding principle in nonprofit crisis response, with nonprofits favoring impartial service provision to maintain broad legitimacy. We challenge the presumption that neutrality is inherently virtuous and explore how it can perpetuate inequities in communities already burdened by social and economic marginalization.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on critical nonprofit studies and the emerging framework of autopoietic ecology, we reconceptualize neutrality not as apolitical impartiality but as a programmatic logic: a distinction-encoding mechanism that stabilizes nonprofit operations by selectively constraining what can be observed, prioritized and acted upon.

Findings – We introduce nonprofit neutrality failure, a condition in which neutrality programs—while once effective in securing legitimacy and reducing complexity—become rigid filters that generate organizational blind spots and reproduce systemic inequities. We develop a process model showing how neutrality failure emerges, becomes self-reinforcing and may be countered through equity-driven counter-programming.

Practical implications – The framework equips nonprofit leaders, funders, and policymakers with a diagnostic tool for identifying neutrality failure and experimenting with counter-programmatic interventions that expand organizational reflexivity and responsiveness.

Social implications – By revealing the structural complicity embedded in neutrality programs, the paper reframes equity not as an external moral imperative but as a viability-enhancing reconfiguration of organizational distinctions. This perspective repositions nonprofits as actors capable of systemic transformation rather than mere crisis stabilizers.

Originality/value – We extend existing accounts of nonprofit sector failure by theorizing neutrality failure and demonstrating how claims to impartiality function as programmatic constraints that sustain exclusion. This contributes a novel systems-theoretical foundation to the critical turn in nonprofit studies.

Keywords Autopoietic ecology, Nonprofit neutrality, Nonprofit neutrality failure, Program

Paper type Conceptual paper

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1. Introduction

Humanitarian nonprofits have long been instrumental in delivering relief during crises. Yet, in recent years, a growing body of nonprofit scholarship has critically examined how crisis responses—particularly those guided by principles of neutrality and technocratic efficiency—can inadvertently reinforce systemic inequities (Miller, 2018; Parachin, 2015; Barnett, 2005). Scholars have argued that such responses often fail to acknowledge how crises disproportionately affect historically marginalized populations along axes of race, class, gender, disability, and migratory status (Diggs *et al.*, 2023; Nickels and Leach, 2021; Collins, 2015). For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital inequalities excluded rural and low-income communities from access to telehealth, education, and remote work infrastructures that more privileged groups seamlessly adopted (Suh *et al.*, 2022; Hoffman, 2022). Similarly, after Hurricane Katrina, while nonprofits played a vital role in emergency response, few addressed the longstanding structural neglect of Black neighborhoods, resulting in profoundly unequal recovery outcomes (Adams, 2013). In the context of Europe's refugee crisis, many organizations eschewed advocacy in order to maintain relationships with host governments, thereby leaving asylum seekers exposed to institutional exploitation and social exclusion (Valentinov *et al.*, 2017).

Humanitarian nonprofits thus occupy a morally charged position in contemporary governance. On the one hand, they are animated by ideals of charity, altruism, and solidarity—ethical commitments that form the sector's normative core and underpin its public legitimacy (Keams, 2013; Rothschild and Milofsky, 2006). On the other hand, this moral self-understanding has long been shadowed by a growing critical discourse that interrogates how humanitarianism, development, and philanthropy remain entangled with global regimes of capitalism and colonialism. Scholars such as Duffield (2007), Fassin (2012), and Redfield (2013) have shown how humanitarian reason transforms suffering into a site of moral administration while leaving intact the political and economic hierarchies that generate it. Postcolonial and decolonial theorists further argue that humanitarian governance perpetuates epistemic hierarchies and Eurocentric norms of care and expertise, thereby stabilizing structural inequalities under the guise of benevolence (Escobar, 2011; Kapoor, 2012; Rutazibwa, 2019). These tensions become particularly acute in crisis contexts, where human suffering is both immediate and visible: the moral imperative to act collides with the unsettling realization that nonprofit responses, however well-intentioned, may inadvertently intensify the very injustices they seek to alleviate.

Elaborating this moral imperative could offer a much-needed contribution to the emerging *critical turn* in nonprofit studies, which interrogates conventional assumptions of legitimacy and technocratic rationality by exposing the systemic power relations that undergird nonprofit practice (Eikenberry *et al.*, 2024; Dean and Wiley, 2022; Coule *et al.*, 2022). Crisis contexts make this tension especially visible: nonprofit humanitarian responses—though indispensable in alleviating immediate suffering—often carry a hidden cost in the form of reproducing the very structural inequities embedded within the crises they seek to address (Mirabella *et al.*, 2024a; Sumner and Hughes, 2024; Prendella and Mirabella, 2024; Dobson, 2020). Moreover, within this critical turn, one of the sector's enduring self-descriptions—the principle of *neutrality*—has remained remarkably underexamined. Notably, the notion of nonprofit neutrality receives no sustained treatment in *The Handbook of Critical Perspectives on Nonprofit Organizing and Voluntary Action* (Mirabella *et al.*, 2024b), despite its political ambivalence having long been recognized within public administration scholarship (Miller, 2018).

In this paper, however, we do not pursue a moral critique. Rather than evaluating nonprofit conduct in ethical terms, our aim is to address this gap in critical nonprofit studies by drawing on Watson and Brezovec's (2025) *autopoietic ecology*—a nascent, Luhmann-inspired research program that extends core insights of social systems theory, including operational closure, structural coupling, and the critique of ontological guarantees, into an ecological-processual account of how social systems maintain viability. From this perspective,

organizations—nonprofits among them—sustain themselves not through moral intent but through recursive operations that selectively stabilize meaning and legitimacy. Within the field of nonprofit studies, autopoietic ecology therefore reframes nonprofit practice not as a neutral arena of service provision, but as a recursive ecology of programs that stabilize, constrain, and at times foreclose systemic transformation (cf. [Watson and Brezovec, 2025](#), p. 125). Neutrality, in this view, functions as a contingent program—a grammar of inclusion and exclusion that, under the guise of impartiality, reproduces a specific distribution of systemic possibilities (ibid., p. 133). What critical nonprofit scholarship has described as identity-based exclusion or structural harm ([Eikenberry et al., 2024](#); [Dean and Wiley, 2022](#); [Coule et al., 2022](#)) may thus be reconceptualized, following [Watson and Brezovec \(2025, cf. p. 133\)](#), as the recursive effect of programs that modulate the organizational constraints shaping nonprofit viability.

We advance critical nonprofit scholarship by introducing nonprofit neutrality failure, a concept that reframes neutrality not as the absence of politics but as a programmatic logic that stabilizes organizational viability by reproducing selective distinctions of impartiality, legitimacy, and risk aversion. Drawing on [Watson and Brezovec's \(2025\)](#) autopoietic ecology, we show how neutrality becomes self-reinforcing: programs that once secured access and reputational stability may, in complex and inequitable environments, narrow observational scope and foreclose alternative courses of action. Building on this insight, we contrast neutrality logic with equity-driven logic, conceptualized not as a moral endpoint but as a form of counter-programming—a recursive re-entry of organizational distinctions that opens new possibilities for observing and addressing structural vulnerability. Although our empirical focus is on humanitarian NGOs, the dynamics we identify resonate across nonprofit fields where viability, legitimacy, and institutional coupling shape organizational practice.

This argument yields three primary contributions. First, we introduce neutrality failure as a new analytic category within critical nonprofit scholarship, demonstrating how claims to neutrality operate as programs that constrain what nonprofits can observe, prioritize, and act upon—especially in crisis contexts. Second, we enrich the critical turn in nonprofit studies by situating nonprofit behavior within autopoietic ecologies of distinction, thereby explaining how neutrality programs stabilize reputational alignment and donor expectations while generating organizational blind spots. This perspective reframes critique in systemic terms: as second-order observation of the distinction ecologies that constitute nonprofit practice. Third, we articulate equity-driven logic as counter-programming, showing how nonprofits may recursively reconfigure their distinction ecologies to sustain viability under conditions of structural inequality. Rather than prescribing a normative shift from neutrality to equity, we theorize how reflexive modulation enables nonprofits to expand the range of viable interventions within complex environments.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. [Section 2](#) outlines the theoretical foundations of autopoietic ecology and its relevance for understanding nonprofit programs and organizational viability. [Section 3](#) situates existing critiques of neutrality within this framework and develops an autopoietic ecology reassessment. [Section 4](#) introduces the concepts of neutrality failure and equity-driven counter-programming, presenting a process model that contrasts the two logics across systemic, organizational, and community contexts. [Section 5](#) outlines practical implications by examining how counter-programming can be operationalized across values, governance, funding, and advocacy. [Section 6](#) discusses the broader scholarly implications, showing how autopoietic ecology deepens and extends the critical turn in nonprofit studies.

2. Conceptual foundation: the approach of autopoietic ecology

Autopoietic ecology is a recent extension of social systems theory that reframes social systems more broadly as ecologies of distinctions, constraints, and programs whose viability depends on how they modulate complexity ([Watson and Brezovec, 2025](#)). Developed as a general

research program in [Watson and Brezovec's \(2025\)](#) foundational volume—on which all subsequent references in this paper rely—it builds on Maturana and Varela's concept of autopoiesis and Luhmann's account of meaning-processing communication as the core operation of social systems ([Luhmann, 1995](#)). From this standpoint, systems remain operationally closed yet structurally open, sustaining themselves through recursive reductions of complexity rather than through the pursuit of stable normative purposes. Viability, accordingly, is neither success nor virtue but the ongoing ability to reproduce communication by stabilizing some expectations while excluding others, an ecological alignment of openness and closure akin to the Luhmannian complexity–sustainability trade-off ([Valentinov, 2014](#); [Valentinov and Pérez-Valls, 2021](#)). When applied to nonprofits and other organizations, this perspective shifts the analytical lens from what such entities are “for” to how they maintain themselves through distinction-making—reductions that enable coordinated action while generating systemic blind spots with far-reaching implications.

A central contribution of autopoietic ecology lies in its integration of Luhmann's theory of meaning processing with Spencer-Brown's logic of distinction ([Spencer-Brown, 1969](#); [Luhmann, 1995](#)). All observation begins by drawing a distinction, thereby creating a marked and an unmarked space. Autopoietic ecology generalizes this insight by describing organizations as constituted through recurring distinctions such as neutral/not-neutral, legitimate/not-legitimate, or crisis/not-crisis. These distinctions are not merely cognitive; they are embedded in programs, procedures, and governance arrangements that specify which side of the distinction is to be selected under which conditions. Re-entry—Spencer-Brown's notion of a distinction being reapplied to itself—captures how organizations can reflexively revisit and redraw their own distinctions. [Watson and Brezovec \(2025\)](#) use this device to show how organizational programs may either become rigid, reproducing the same marked side across contexts, or be loosened through counter-programming that introduces alternative grammars of observation. Programs in this sense do not prescribe outcomes; they structure the *conditions under which outcomes become more or less possible*. A program therefore functions as a selective mechanism: it filters observations, de-limits available courses of action, and shapes the organization's internal ecology of meaning. Neutrality programs, advocacy programs, efficiency programs, risk-avoidance programs—each configures a distinct grammar of inclusion and exclusion that modulates how the organization can observe and act within its environment.

Autopoietic ecology extends the Luhmannian legacy by emphasizing the *recursive and distinction-based* nature of programs. A program operationalizes a distinction—neutral/not-neutral, acceptable/not-acceptable, urgent/not-urgent—by encoding the conditions under which one side of the distinction is to be selected rather than the other. In this way, programs enact [Spencer-Brown's \(1969\)](#) principle that every distinction has a marked side and an unmarked side. The marked side (e.g. “neutral action”) becomes the default selection criterion, whereas the unmarked side remains implicit, unexamined, or systematically excluded from organizational attention. [Watson and Brezovec \(2025\)](#) highlight that programs are not static artifacts but recursive operations: organizations continually re-enter their own distinctions to refine, stabilize, or transform them. This recursive dynamic allows programs to drift, expand, contract, or become rigid—processes that profoundly shape how organizations maintain viability over time.

The recursive nature of programs becomes particularly salient when environmental conditions perturb the system in ways that challenge its existing distinctions. Because organizations can only modify their programs through their own operations, programmatic change requires *internal re-entry*: the system must observe its own distinction (e.g. neutral/not-neutral) and redraw it in a way that renders previously excluded possibilities observable. This is where autopoietic ecology's contribution is most evident. It theorizes programmatic change not as external correction or normative alignment, but as a systemic transformation internal to the organization's ecological constraints. Programs become sites of modulation: they can tighten into rigid filters that foreclose alternative courses of action, or they can loosen

through counter-programming that expands the system's capacity for viable variation. In this view, what appears externally as a normative shift—for instance, a move from an efficiency-driven operational program to one that prioritizes care or relational responsiveness—can be reconstructed internally as a recursive recalibration of distinction-based constraints.

Understanding programs as recursive conditional schemas thus sheds light on both organizational stability and organizational blind spots. Stability arises when programs reliably reproduce the same marked side of a distinction across contexts, generating consistent patterns of decision-making. Blind spots emerge when the recursive application of a program renders the unmarked side increasingly inaccessible, reducing the system's capacity to observe the consequences of its own decisions. Governance problems, legitimacy crises, and systemic failures can all be understood as manifestations of the complexity–sustainability tradeoff (Valentinov, 2014), arising when recursive closures restrict the system's capacity to recalibrate its own distinctions. Autopoietic ecology therefore positions programs as central to organizational viability: they are the primary mechanisms through which systems sustain themselves under complexity, and the primary sites at which they may encounter—and potentially overcome—the limits of their own selectivity.

Autopoietic ecology potentially offers a distinctive perspective on the role of nonprofits within functionally differentiated society. Luhmannian approaches already suggest that nonprofits emerge where the dominant codes of the economy and politics—payment/non-payment, government/opposition—cannot adequately process social demands (Maier *et al.*, 2025; Valentinov *et al.*, 2015). Nonprofits are multifunctional in the sense that they orient toward function systems other than the economy or politics—health, education, religion, community, science—often without being fully governed by any single one (Will *et al.*, 2018). This structural looseness from payment and power codes both constrains and enables: nonprofits remain operationally closed and self-referential (Ferreira, 2014), yet their exposure to heterogeneous expectations positions them as potential sites of second-order observation, where distinctions used by other systems can themselves become objects of scrutiny. Watson and Brezovec (2025) capture this role in terms of counter-programming: nonprofits can, in principle, re-enter dominant programs—such as neutrality, efficiency, or technocratic risk management—with alternative distinctions that foreground equity, accountability, or structural redress.

The notion of counter-programming informs critical social thought by reframing critique not as a moral imperative but as an operation of second-order observation. Critical theory in its various strands—from Frankfurt School perspectives to feminist, decolonial, and post-structural approaches—seeks to reveal the limits, blind spots, and exclusions that systems generate through their own modes of operation. Autopoietic ecology provides a formal vocabulary for conceptualizing this task. Following Luhmann (1995), second-order observation refers to the observation of observation: an examination of the distinctions through which systems constitute meaning. This orientation departs from normative external critique and instead attends to the internal mechanisms through which systems mark some possibilities as salient and render others unobservable. Autopoietic ecology extends this approach by treating these distinctions as ecologies—interdependent and recursively reproduced patterns that guide organizational viability. Within this framework, reflexivity is not an optional enhancement but a structural condition of systemic adaptation.

Yet, reflexivity is inherently bounded by self-reference. A system cannot step outside itself to gain an Archimedean vantage point; it can only re-enter its own distinctions and observe the constraints it has previously drawn. Von Foerster (1984) famously framed this as a “loss of a degree of freedom”: when a system observes itself, it does so through the very operations it seeks to scrutinize. Autopoietic ecology takes this paradox seriously. It understands reflexivity not as the capacity to transcend systemic boundaries but as the recursive oscillation between marked and unmarked spaces—between what the system already observes and what becomes newly visible through re-entry. Reflexivity, in this sense, is always conditioned, partial, and endogenous. This conception of reflexivity resonates strongly with

Watson and Brezovec's (2025) emphasis on non-imposition from outside. Systems cannot be steered, corrected, or improved through external mandates because operational closure prohibits direct intervention. Instead, systemic transformation occurs when organizations redraw their own distinctions—when they re-enter programs whose rigidity has foreclosed viable variation. Such re-entry mirrors the gesture of critical social thought: to reveal how taken-for-granted distinctions produce structural blind spots and to enable alternative distinctions that broaden the scope of what is observable and actionable.

3. Rethinking nonprofit neutrality

This section revisits the nonprofit sector's longstanding commitment to neutrality by placing existing critiques in dialog with the autopoietic ecology framework. It begins by reviewing the dominant, often morally framed critiques of neutrality, showing how impartial service provision can entrench systemic inequities. It then offers an autopoietic ecology reassessment, reframing neutrality and equity not as normative opposites but as programmatic logics whose recursive interplay shapes organizational legitimacy, reflexivity, and viability.

3.1 Existing critique of neutrality

Neutrality is frequently championed as a cornerstone of nonprofit identity, particularly in crisis contexts. Rooted in humanitarian traditions, it is associated with principles of impartiality and non-alignment, allowing nonprofits to present themselves as apolitical and universally trustworthy intermediaries (Barnett, 2005; Parachin, 2015). This framing has gained normative traction in global humanitarian doctrines (Weller, 1997), positioning neutrality as both an ethical commitment and a practical strategy for navigating complex political terrains. Nonprofits that adhere to neutrality can often secure access to politically sensitive regions, ensure uninterrupted operations, and appeal to a broad spectrum of donors, including states, philanthropic foundations, and corporate funders (Miller, 2018; Seybolt, 1996).

Defined in these terms, neutrality serves a dual function: it enhances perceived legitimacy by signaling impartiality, and it shields organizations from the reputational risks associated with political alignment (Parachin, 2015). As Lindenberg and Bryant (2001) and Bordoloi (2020) observe, this ethos often operates as a silent assumption within the organizational field of humanitarian nonprofits. It is further reinforced through funding regimes and legal frameworks that reward depoliticized service delivery. In this sense, neutrality functions as both a virtue and a strategy—highlighting a logic of risk minimization that stabilizes nonprofit operations under conditions of uncertainty (McMullin and Raggio, 2020).

While the normative appeal of neutrality from a nonprofit management perspective is evident, its implications appear far more troubling when viewed through critical moral lenses such as intersectionality (cf. Chaplin *et al.*, 2019). Scholars have long shown that crisis impacts are never evenly distributed; rather, they intersect with pre-existing forms of social stratification—racism, sexism, classism, ableism, xenophobia—to produce differential vulnerability (Diggs *et al.*, 2023; Nickels and Leach, 2021; Collins, 2015). From this vantage point, equal treatment—the hallmark of neutrality—often translates into unequal outcomes because it disregards the cumulative disadvantages borne by specific communities. Neutral allocation of resources, though ostensibly fair, can thus exacerbate inequalities by failing to account for intersecting forms of oppression. Research in the disaster literature makes this clear: in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Maria, nonprofits and community organizations operating alongside government agencies frequently reproduced inequities in aid distribution, relying on outreach mechanisms and service infrastructures that disproportionately served more privileged or better-connected populations (Adams, 2013; Elliott and Pais, 2006; Fussell, 2015; Ersing, 2004). As Tierney (2025) emphasizes, crises do not flatten social hierarchies—they intensify them. These cases illustrate how even well-intentioned nonprofits, when guided by neutrality programs, can unwittingly mirror

broader patterns of spatial exclusion, political disenfranchisement, and racialized vulnerability, thereby entrenching the very injustices they seek to alleviate.

These examples underscore that crisis response efforts do not unfold in a political vacuum; rather, they are embedded within institutional and governance frameworks that determine which populations receive aid—and on what terms (Parachin, 2015). When nonprofit practices operate in the absence of critical engagement with power and privilege, they risk inadvertently legitimizing the very hierarchies they seek to mitigate. Even when aid is delivered with technical efficiency, the deeper structural forces that produce vulnerability—such as chronic disinvestment in marginalized communities or exclusion from labor markets—often remain unaddressed (Betts and Collier, 2017; Leaning, 2007). Increasingly, nonprofit practitioners and scholars alike have begun to interrogate how neutrality itself is embedded within institutional logics that privilege managerial efficiency, apolitical legitimacy, and donor responsiveness over long-term structural transformation (Wandera, 2020). For instance, aid allocation schemes based on ostensibly “objective” metrics—such as population figures or standardized poverty indicators—may obscure how intersecting forms of disadvantage shape actual access to services (Diggs *et al.*, 2023). Moreover, a strict commitment to neutrality can significantly constrain advocacy efforts, as organizations navigate the dual risks of alienating politically sensitive funders or violating legal restrictions associated with their tax-exempt status (Suarez, 2020; Mosley, 2012).

Insights from institutional theory offer a crucial lens through which to examine the entrenchment of neutrality in nonprofit practice. As Thornton *et al.* (2012) and Greenwood *et al.* (2011) have argued, organizations routinely internalize dominant institutional logics, rendering specific behaviors not merely rational but seemingly inevitable. In the nonprofit sector, neutrality has crystallized into such a logic—codified through legal frameworks, philanthropic expectations, and funding structures that reward non-contentious, technocratic engagement (Suarez, 2020). During periods of crisis, this logic is further reinforced as state actors increasingly outsource service delivery to “neutral” nonprofits in a bid to sidestep political controversy (McMullin and Raggio, 2020). The result is a mutually reinforcing arrangement wherein governments deflect accountability while nonprofits accrue legitimacy, but at the cost of constraining the scope for transformative social action.

Yet neutrality is not the only possible lodestar for nonprofit activity. Historically, many organizations have advanced explicitly justice-oriented mandates, engaging in grassroots mobilization, systemic advocacy, and policy reform (Ransby, 2018; Gaventa and Barrett, 2012). Recent contributions within the critical nonprofit studies tradition highlight the emergence of equity-driven approaches, particularly among nonprofits rooted in and accountable to marginalized communities (Ganesh *et al.*, 2024; Xie, 2024). Such organizations make explicit the ways in which intersecting structures of oppression—race, gender, class, and disability—shape vulnerability and must be central to the design of interventions (Holgerson and Hvenmark, 2023; Diggs *et al.*, 2023). Their work frequently involves coalition-building, strategic litigation, and community-led governance practices (Wandera, 2020). As Eikenberry *et al.* (2024) observe, feminist, decolonial, and critical race epistemologies are increasingly influencing nonprofit scholarship, offering alternative institutional logics rooted in care, relational accountability, and structural redress. Logan and Feit (2024), for example, demonstrate how nonprofits led by communities of color actively contest white philanthropic norms by institutionalizing community-governed decision-making. Similarly, Ganesh *et al.* (2024) call for nonprofits to operate not as neutral service brokers but as affective and communicative agents of structural transformation. These interventions reveal that neutrality is not a universal principle but a historically contingent and ideologically laden logic—one that can, and must, be reimagined through intentional, equity-driven practice.

In sum, the studies reviewed above suggest that neutrality offers a critical vantage point for assessing whether nonprofits are genuinely committed to transformative agendas or remain tethered to practices that stabilize existing hierarchies. What remains needed is a conceptual approach that can reveal these dynamics without collapsing into moral essentialization. Autopoietic ecology furnishes precisely such a lens, as the next subsection shows.

3.2 An autopoietic ecology reassessment

The critiques reviewed above highlight neutrality as a normative and political problem—an ethical stance that, despite its aspirational impartiality, may reproduce or intensify structural inequalities during crises. Autopoietic ecology offers a different point of departure. Rather than assessing neutrality in moral terms, it invites us to examine neutrality as a *programmatically operation*—a conditional schema that selects certain observations and actions while excluding others. From this perspective, neutrality is neither intrinsically virtuous nor inherently harmful; it is a distinction that nonprofits draw to maintain viability under conditions of uncertainty. Its limitations emerge not because the program is morally deficient, but because its recursive application can render critical aspects of crisis conditions unobservable.

A central implication of this shift is that neutrality cannot be meaningfully contrasted with “equity” as if the two constituted opposing moral poles. Instead, autopoietic ecology reframes neutrality and equity as *co-constitutive logics* that operate as alternative organizational programs. Neutrality programs emphasize impartiality, stability, and risk minimization; equity programs foreground differentiated need, structural vulnerability, and historical disadvantage. Each logic selectively illuminates certain features of crisis environments while obscuring others. In Luhmannian terms, both operate as distinctions—neutral/not-neutral, equitable/inequitable—that guide organizational selectivity. Their interplay reveals the recursive dynamics of nonprofit legitimacy: neutrality often enhances access and donor trust, while equity enhances resonance with communities facing disproportionate harm. Effective crisis response routinely requires both horizons. It demands the urgency, coordination, and stabilization associated with neutrality programming, but also the differentiated attention to vulnerability and structural injustice emphasized by equity programming. Autopoietic ecology therefore rejects essentialist claims that one program is inherently superior; instead, it highlights the organization’s challenge of modulating between them.

This reframing foregrounds not morality but *reflexivity*—particularly second-order observation—as the critical missing ingredient in existing nonprofit approaches to neutrality. Traditional critiques often assume that nonprofits fail because they misjudge their ethical obligations. Autopoietic ecology suggests instead that neutrality failures occur when organizations lack the reflexive capacity to observe the constraints their own distinction draws. Neutrality becomes problematic when its marked side (“impartiality”) is reproduced so consistently that the unmarked side (“structural inequality”) becomes inaccessible to organizational observation. This is not a moral failure but a systemic closure: a reduction of complexity necessary for organizational survival that, when rigidified, narrows the range of viable responses to crisis environments.

Reflexivity in this context must be understood within the bounds of self-reference. As [von Foerster \(1984\)](#) and [Luhmann \(2012\)](#) emphasize, systems cannot step outside themselves to acquire an external, corrective view. They must observe their own distinctions through re-entry, examining how their programs structure their field of possible observations. Autopoietic ecology thus positions reflexivity not as a moral awakening but as an endogenous operation in which an organization re-enters its neutrality program to detect what that program systematically renders invisible. [Watson and Brezovec \(2025\)](#) emphasize that organizational change cannot be imposed from outside: systems can only change through internal modulation, not through external exhortation. For nonprofits, this means that calls to “be more equitable” or “abandon neutrality” cannot be implemented directly. What is possible, however, is a recursive recalibration of the neutrality distinction—an internal shift in what is observable—and this is precisely the locus of organizational learning.

Framing neutrality and equity as programmatic logics also helps avoid moral essentialization. In moral critiques, neutrality tends to appear as a failure of commitment, while equity is presented as an ethical imperative. Autopoietic ecology rejects this dichotomy. Neutrality programs may enhance viability in settings where access, safety, and legitimacy depend upon non-alignment; equity programs may enhance viability where legitimacy depends upon responsiveness to structural injustice. Whether an organization foregrounds one

or the other is not a matter of moral fiber but of the recursive constraints that shape what it can observe, articulate, and enact. The task is not to judge these logics but to understand when their recursive patterns cease to support the organization's viability—when neutrality becomes too rigid to perceive structural vulnerabilities, or when equity commitments threaten the organization's access or operational continuity. Both are limited; both are necessary; both require reflexive modulation.

This analysis points toward a broader governance problem. Neutrality and equity are not mutually exclusive stances but distinctions that nonprofits must navigate to maintain legitimacy across multiple audiences—donors, states, communities, and service partners. Yet the nonprofit literature has rarely conceptualized neutrality as a distinction with recursive effects, doing so enables a more precise diagnosis of governance failures: problems arise not when nonprofits morally “fail,” but when they cannot re-enter and recalibrate the neutrality–equity distinction as crisis conditions evolve. Introducing this distinction explicitly—and analyzing its programmatic dynamics—provides conceptual clarity for later sections of this paper. It establishes the foundation for theorizing *nonprofit neutrality failure* as a systemic phenomenon and for articulating how equity and neutrality can function as complementary logics whose recursive interplay shapes organizational viability in crisis environments.

4. Theoretical framework

This section develops the paper's central theoretical contribution by translating the autopoietic ecology perspective into an analytical framework for understanding how nonprofits reproduce—or reconfigure—structural inequities in crisis contexts. We first introduce the concept of nonprofit neutrality failure, theorizing neutrality as a programmatic logic whose recursive application can generate organizational blind spots and constrain viable action. We then present a process model that contrasts neutrality logic with equity-driven counter-programming, conceptualized as alternative distinction ecologies rather than moral opposites.

4.1 Conceptualizing nonprofit neutrality failure

The preceding review suggests that, viewed through the lens of [Watson and Brezovec's \(2025\)](#) autopoietic ecology, nonprofit neutrality is less a normative commitment than a programmatic operation—a conditional schema that filters organizational observations and stabilizes decisions by privileging non-alignment, depoliticization, and technical service delivery. Such programs can support organizational continuity in volatile environments, yet they also narrow the range of distinctions an organization can meaningfully process. Neutrality failure, in this perspective, does not arise from ethical deficiency but from programmatic rigidity: the recursive reproduction of a neutrality distinction (neutral/not-neutral) that has ceased to sustain viable variation under conditions of growing environmental complexity. The resulting analytical challenge for scholars and practitioners is not to condemn neutrality in moral terms but to understand when neutrality programs restrict second-order observation, foreclose re-entry into foundational distinctions, and thereby diminish the organization's capacity to modulate its own operations.

Nonprofit scholarship has long anticipated the need for such a framework, particularly within heterodox institutional economics. [Valentinov et al. \(2013\)](#) distinguish between service delivery and advocacy roles, noting that while the former works within existing institutional arrangements to alleviate immediate need, the latter seeks to reshape those arrangements by altering the communicative and symbolic structures through which social problems are defined. From an autopoietic standpoint, this contrast reflects two distinct programmatic ecologies: one that stabilizes existing distinctions and another that re-enters them. Humanitarian NGOs that confine themselves to “neutral” provisioning may preserve

operational access and donor legitimacy, yet such neutrality programs can restrict what the organization is able to observe about structural drivers of vulnerability (ibid). [Garrow and Hasenfeld \(2014\)](#) analysis similarly demonstrates how U.S. human service organizations are structurally coupled to neoliberal expectations that frame hardship in individualized terms. In such contexts, neutrality does not signify impartiality; it functions as a selective alignment with hegemonic discourses that render systemic drivers unmarked. [Xie's \(2024\)](#) work on environmental nonprofits in China reveals comparable dynamics, showing how organizations adopt development-oriented framings that avoid political contestation, thereby reproducing institutional expectations rather than reconfiguring them.

Taken together, these studies underscore a central insight: nonprofit neutrality is not an absence of ideology but a programmatic orientation embedded in historically sedimented institutional logics—shaped by colonial legacies, market rationalities, and epistemic hierarchies. In autopoietic terms, nonprofits that do not re-enter these logics do not remain “neutral”; they reproduce distinction ecologies that limit what can be observed or problematized. Conversely, organizations centering justice, care, or systemic critique do not merely reject neutrality in moral terms; they activate counter-programming ([Watson and Brezovec, 2025](#)), re-entering the neutrality distinction and expanding the set of viable options the system can pursue. These considerations lead us to propose the term *nonprofit neutrality failure* to capture a specific systemic consequence: the condition in which neutrality programs underspecify reflexivity, restricting an organization's ability to observe how its own operations contribute to ongoing inequities. Neutrality failure, in this sense, reflects not a lack of goodwill but a deficit of recursive modulation—an inability to redraw the distinctions through which nonprofits interpret their environments and guide their interventions.

The concept of *nonprofit neutrality failure* builds upon and extends a longstanding tradition in nonprofit theory that interrogates the sector's internal limitations. [Salamon and Toepler \(2015\)](#) famously argued that while nonprofits often emerge to address market and governmental shortcomings, they remain susceptible to their own dysfunctions—what they termed “voluntary failure.” Yet this taxonomy has not accounted for the risks posed by institutionalized neutrality. We therefore propose neutrality failure as a distinct addition to this lineage: a form of dysfunction grounded in organizational selectivity. Neutrality failure arises when nonprofits rely on programs that stabilize legitimacy at the expense of reflexive re-entry, diminishing their capacity to engage structural complexity. The link to autopoietic ecology is direct. Programs encode the distinctions that determine which observations are available to the system; when these programs rigidify, they restrict the organization's ability to register emerging perturbations or to recognize the unmarked spaces within its own operations ([Watson and Brezovec, 2025](#), p. 134). In this sense, neutrality becomes not a guarantor of fairness but a structural impediment to adaptive viability—especially where it aligns with racial capitalism, settler colonialism, or other intersecting regimes of exclusion.

Although the primary empirical focus of this paper is on humanitarian NGOs, neutrality failure manifests across nonprofit domains. In U.S. human services, neutrality programs may lead organizations to provide food, shelter, or counseling while leaving unmarked the structural drivers of poverty, wage precarity, or housing discrimination ([Garrow and Hasenfeld, 2014](#)). In public health, neutrality takes the form of silence on environmental racism or social determinants of health ([Carroll-Scott et al., 2017](#)). Educational nonprofits may individualize learning disparities while rendering systemic inequities—funding disparities, linguistic marginalization, racialized discipline—unobservable ([Holder, 2025](#)). Arts institutions may reproduce Eurocentric canons or curatorial exclusions under logics of professional neutrality ([White, 2018](#)). Even advocacy organizations can experience neutrality failure when donor, regulatory, or political pressures induce programmatic moderation that limits reflexivity ([INCITE, 2007](#)). Across these settings, neutrality failure emerges when nonprofits prioritize broad-based legitimacy, risk aversion, and depoliticized service over the recursive re-entry needed to maintain viability under complex, stratified conditions.

4.2 Neutrality logic and equity-driven logic: a process model

Building on the autopoietic ecology reassessment of neutrality, we conceptualize two ideal-typical programmatic orientations—neutrality logic and equity-driven logic—positioned along a continuum rather than treated as a dichotomy. The continuum is analytically important: in practice, nonprofits occupy shifting positions shaped by their couplings to funders, regulators, communities, and broader institutional environments. Neutrality logic stabilizes organizational operations through technocratic universalism, risk minimization, and upward accountability to donors and regulatory authorities. By contrast, equity-driven logic re-enters these assumptions by drawing on epistemologies of positionality, intersectionality, and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989). It privileges downward accountability to communities and foregrounds distinctions—care, redress, positionality—that expand the organization’s capacity to observe structural drivers of inequity. Table 1 juxtaposes these two logics across five dimensions central to nonprofit practice.

From the standpoint of autopoietic ecology, this contrast maps onto the distinction between programmatic filtering and counter-programming. Neutrality logic operates as a program that reproduces a stable distinction between neutral/not-neutral, enabling access and legitimacy but narrowing what the organization can observe about its environment. Equity-driven logic acts as counter-programming; it re-enters this distinction, loosens the constraints encoded in neutrality programs, and modulates which communications count as legitimate. Importantly, counter-programming does not require stepping “outside” the system but draws on the system’s own operations to reconfigure meaning, expanding its viable pathways for engagement and action. Thus, the movement from neutrality toward equity is not an ethical escalation but a recursive recalibration of distinction ecologies, enabling organizations to maintain viability in environments structured by historical and intersectional inequality.

To understand how neutrality logic becomes dominant and self-reinforcing, we introduce a process model that traces the recursive dynamics across three analytically distinct levels: the

Table 1. Neutrality logic and equity-driven logic: Comparative dimensions across a continuum

Dimension	Neutrality logic	Equity-driven logic
Epistemology	Technocratic universalism; reliance on depersonalized metrics and standardized indicators; presumes equivalence of beneficiary positions (Weller, 1997; Parachin, 2015)	Situated knowledge and intersectional positionality; recognizes differentiated vulnerability and historically produced disadvantage (Haraway, 1988; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989)
Accountability Orientation	Primarily upward: donors, governments, regulatory regimes; legitimacy tied to non-contentious, apolitical posture (Suarez, 2020)	Primarily downward: communities, social movements, justice norms; legitimacy emerges from responsiveness to structurally marginalized groups (Ransby, 2018; Logan and Feit, 2024)
Operational Focus	Risk-averse service delivery; emphasis on access preservation, continuity, and depoliticized crisis response (McMullin and Raggio, 2020)	Advocacy, structural redress, community-led governance; integrates services with systemic challenge (Ganesh et al., 2024; Wandera, 2020)
Ethical Stance	Ethical non-judgmentalism; commitment to impartiality and non-alignment; foregrounds neutrality as moral virtue (Barnett, 2005; Parachin, 2015)	Ethical responsibility to recognize and respond to unjust structural conditions (Fraser, 2005; Young, 2011); emphasizes relational accountability and care
Structural Alignment	Alignment with dominant institutional logics (managerialism, legalism, donor compliance); tends to reproduce existing power configurations (Thornton et al., 2012)	Alignment with counter-hegemonic or transformative projects (decolonial, anti-racist, feminist); opens space for contestation and alternative programs (Holgerson and Hvenmark, 2023)

Source(s): Authors’ own work

systemic (institutional structures shaping nonprofit environments), the organizational (internal programs, leadership cultures, and decision premises), and the community (patterns of interaction, expectation, and agency at the level of affected populations). The differences between these levels are highlighted in [Table 2](#), even though these differences can blur in practice. The purpose of distinguishing levels is not to assert rigid separations but to map different sites of programmatic coupling—funding regimes and legal infrastructures (systemic), organizational decision premises (organizational), and participatory expectations and trust dynamics (community).

At the systemic level, neutrality is driven by funders, legal regimes, and institutional logics that reward depoliticized conduct and penalize overt engagement with structural drivers of injustice ([Suarez, 2020](#); [McMullin and Raggo, 2020](#)). These couplings reinforce the neutrality program as a condition for maintaining legitimacy, access, and operational continuity. At the organizational level, neutrality is reproduced through risk-averse leadership, managerial cultures, and professional norms that prioritize stability, access, and non-contentious service delivery. These programs filter observations, creating operational blind spots that limit second-order reflection on the organization’s role in reproducing structural inequities ([Leaning, 2007](#)). At the community level, neutrality manifests when nonprofits maintain distance from grassroots movements, limit participatory governance, or emphasize service provision over community empowerment. Such patterns may appear to be community-level phenomena but often reflect upstream systemic and organizational programs; the levels interact recursively rather than hierarchically.

Across these levels, three interrelated mechanisms reproduce neutrality and give rise to neutrality failure. Resource allocation bias emerges when uniform formulas or “first-come, first-served” procedures privilege those with greater linguistic fluency, digital access, or social capital (cf. [Seybolt, 1996](#)). Operational blind spots arise when organizations focus narrowly on immediate crises, thereby obscuring structural drivers such as housing discrimination, labor

Table 2. Drivers, mechanisms, and outcomes of nonprofit neutrality

Component	Systemic level (institutional structures, funders, legal regimes)	Organizational level (decision premises, programs, leadership, professional norms)	Community level (local interactions, expectations, participation, trust)
Drivers of neutrality	Funding architectures, philanthropic expectations, and legal constraints incentivize depoliticization to preserve broad legitimacy (Suarez, 2020 ; McMullin and Raggo, 2020)	Risk-averse leadership cultures and professionalization internalize systemic expectations, prioritizing continuity and non-contention	Nonprofits are expected to remain nonpartisan, which can distance them from grassroots actors and community-led advocacy
Mechanisms reproducing neutrality	Resource allocation bias: universalist criteria and “objective” metrics advantage those with pre-existing access or capital (Seybolt, 1996)	Operational blind spots: crisis models focus on symptoms rather than structural drivers of vulnerability (Leaning, 2007)	Advocacy silences: community demands for structural change remain unaddressed when nonprofits avoid political engagement (Mosley, 2012)
Outcomes of neutrality	Structural inequities persist or deepen because systemic causes remain unchallenged	Mission misalignment and trust erosion occur when organizations’ stated commitments diverge from lived practice	Cycles of dependency form when communities receive services without agency in shaping structural conditions

Source(s): Authors’ own work

precarity, or environmental racism (Leaning, 2007). Advocacy silences occur when fear of funder reprisal, legal sanctions, or reputational risk discourages engagement with policy structures that sustain inequity (Suarez, 2020; Mosley, 2012). Together, these mechanisms demonstrate how neutrality programs can become over-specified, constraining an organization’s capacity for distinction re-entry and diminishing its viability in complex, unequal environments.

The mechanisms generate three classes of outcomes. Systemically, inequities remain unaddressed and often deepen. Organizationally, mission drift and trust erosion emerge when operations diverge from stated commitments to justice or community responsiveness. At the community level, cycles of dependency persist, as nonprofits respond to recurring crises without addressing their structural origins. By mapping the recursive interplay of drivers, mechanisms, and outcomes, the process model (Figure 1; Table 2) shows how neutrality becomes entrenched through self-reinforcement: outcomes feed back into the conditions that initially incentivized neutrality, thereby strengthening the neutrality program across all three levels. Crucially, neutrality failure emerges when neutrality programs can no longer sustain viable variation in contexts marked by intersecting inequities. Reflexive re-entry becomes necessary, yet organizational coupling to systemic pressures and internalized norms may prevent such re-entry from occurring.

Moving toward equity-driven logic requires loosening neutrality’s constraints and enabling second-order observation—recognizing when neutrality programs restrict the organization’s capacity to observe and intervene in structural vulnerability. Equity-driven practice reconfigures distinction ecologies through targeted resource allocation, community-governed decision-making, and engagement with policy drivers of injustice. Such a shift is not merely normative but systemic: it expands the organization’s viable pathways for navigating complex environments while reducing the recursive reproduction of inequity.

The continuum model is therefore not a moral ranking but an analytical compass. Organizations move along it in context-dependent ways. Advocacy groups may lean toward equity-driven logic while still exhibiting neutrality failure under regulatory or funding pressures. Humanitarian NGOs often remain closer to the neutrality pole but may experiment with counter-programming such as participatory governance or targeted interventions. Ultimately, the continuum clarifies how nonprofits can recalibrate their distinctions to maintain viability while responding more effectively to structurally unequal environments.

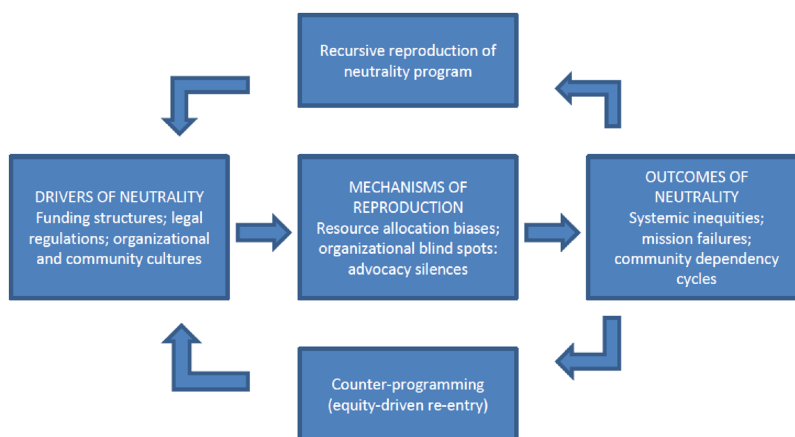


Figure 1. The process model of neutrality and equity-driven practices. Source: Authors’ own work

5. Operationalizing neutrality and equity logics in nonprofit practice

The preceding analysis shows that neutrality operates as a program that has long stabilized nonprofit action in crisis contexts, yet may become increasingly non-viable—and increasingly reflexively inadequate—in environments marked by intersecting inequities. From the perspective of autopoietic ecology, movement from neutrality toward equity is not a moral injunction but a process of counter-programming: an internal re-entry into the organization's own distinction ecologies that broadens what can be observed, decided, and acted upon. Reflexivity in this sense is not the transcendence of self-reference but the capacity to revisit and redraw established distinctions—neutral/not-neutral, service/advocacy, risk/safety—in ways that open new possibilities for organizational responsiveness. Because systems can observe themselves only through the distinctions they already employ, the pathways outlined below should not be read as prescriptive mandates. Rather, they represent potential forms of endogenous modulation through which nonprofits may recalibrate their programs when neutrality no longer sustains viable operations.

To render these endogenous pathways more analytically visible, we outline a framework across four interlocking domains—organizational values, governance, funding, and policy and advocacy—that illustrates how equity-oriented counter-programming may take shape (Table 3). This framework does not prescribe a universal model; rather, it identifies where and how an organization's distinction ecologies can evolve, expand, or remain closed, depending on its structural couplings, identity constructions, and operational constraints.

For many nonprofits, neutrality programs hinge on a value schema that frames mission as universal service, intentionally avoiding political differentiation. Autopoietic ecology highlights how this schema restricts the organization's observational field by presuming equivalence among beneficiaries. When empirical environments are characterized by intersectional disparities (Collins, 2015; Nickels and Leach, 2021; Diggs *et al.*, 2023), such equivalence becomes increasingly difficult to sustain. A re-entry of value distinctions may occur when organizations acknowledge that vulnerability is patterned by structural forces—racism, class stratification, migratory status, disability—and that operating as if these patterns were absent constrains both efficacy and viability. This does not entail abandoning neutrality in a moral sense, nor importing equity as an external ideal. Rather, it involves modulating value programs so that equity becomes internally meaningful as a criterion for observation and decision-making. Practices such as equity audits, disaggregated metrics, and community-centered evaluation function as distinction operations that widen the organization's repertoire for interpreting crises (García-López, 2018; Wandera, 2020). Such re-entry increases the system's capacity to navigate complex environments without presupposing a normative shift imposed from outside.

Table 3. Operationalizing equity-driven counter-programming

Domain	Neutrality logic	Equity-driven counter-programming
Organizational values	Universalistic, apolitical mission; emphasis on impartial service	Re-entry of value programs through explicit attention to positionality, differentiated vulnerability, and structural causality
Governance	Centralized expertise; legitimacy anchored in professionalization	Expanded governance distinctions: community co-observation, participatory decision-making, lived-experience authority
Funding	Donor-driven priorities; preference for short-term, depoliticized, measurable interventions	Funding ecologies that sustain viable variation: unrestricted support, grassroots contributions, justice-oriented collaboratives
Policy and advocacy	Strategic avoidance of contentious issues to maintain access and neutrality	Activation of structural observation: systemic advocacy, coalition building, and engagement with root causes

Source(s): Authors' own work

Governance structures also reveal how neutrality programs reproduce themselves. Organizational leadership frequently stabilizes legitimacy by prioritizing professional expertise and formal accountability mechanisms (Guo and Musso, 2007). These distinctions filter which perspectives count as actionable knowledge. In contexts of structural inequality, however, this filter can narrow the organization's observational bandwidth, limiting access to forms of experiential knowledge essential for interpreting local conditions (Gaventa and Barrett, 2012; Coule, 2015). Equity-driven counter-programming may occur when organizations recursively re-enter governance distinctions and broaden them to include co-observation with affected communities. This is not democratic reform for its own sake. It is a viability-enhancing recalibration in which community participation functions as a second-order observation mechanism that reveals unmarked spaces in existing programs. Instruments such as participatory budgeting, community seats on boards, and iterative feedback loops do not impose equity norms externally; they expand the organization's internal mechanisms for sensemaking by incorporating forms of knowledge previously excluded by neutrality programs (Nickels and Leach, 2021). The result is a more diverse distinction ecology capable of responding to complex crisis environments.

Funding architectures represent a significant structural coupling that shapes the programs nonprofits can enact. Neutrality logic is reinforced when funders prioritize apolitical, short-term, and easily measurable projects (Mosley, 2012; Parachin, 2015). These expectations often operate as external constraints that organizations internalize as decision premises. Autopoietic ecology reframes this not as coercion but as structural coupling, where donor expectations become part of the organization's own distinction ecology. Counter-programming within funding domains emerges when organizations renegotiate these couplings—either by articulating how systemic work aligns with donors' interests (e.g. resilience, sustainability) or by diversifying funding toward grassroots or unrestricted sources (Chaplin *et al.*, 2019; Husted *et al.*, 2024). The point is not that nonprofits should seek "better funding," but that new funding ecologies can loosen rigidity in neutrality programs, thereby creating space for viable variation. When nonprofits secure funding not exclusively tied to neutrality expectations, they gain degrees of freedom to re-enter their own programs and activate more structurally attuned distinctions.

Finally, policy engagement becomes intelligible in an autopoietic ecological framework not as a moral responsibility but as an expansion of the organization's observational horizon. Neutrality programs typically treat policy structures as environmental givens rather than as objects of intervention. Equity-driven counter-programming re-enters this distinction by enabling the organization to treat policy not merely as context but as a domain of structural causation (Ransby, 2018; Suarez, 2020). Coalition-building, legislative advocacy, or challenging discriminatory ordinances thus represent internal expansions of the system's ability to observe and modulate its environment. This does not imply that every nonprofit should become an advocacy organization. Instead, policy engagement becomes a viability option—a way to prevent recurrent crises from overwhelming the organization by addressing the structural drivers that continually perturb it. When nonprofits broaden their distinction ecologies to include structural causality, they increase their capacity for long-term stability, even if doing so introduces new risks or challenges existing legitimacy expectations.

Across these four domains, the transition from neutrality logic to equity-driven counter-programming reflects not moral awakening but systemic recalibration. Organizations do not "choose" equity; they activate it when their existing programs—neutrality, technocratic universalism, risk aversion—no longer suffice to maintain viability in highly stratified environments. Equity thus emerges as a distinctive mode of second-order observation, enabling nonprofits to re-enter their own programs, expand their distinction ecologies, and navigate the blind spots produced by neutrality. In this sense, equity is not an external critique but an internal possibility—one that becomes meaningful to the organization precisely when its environment renders neutrality insufficient for sustaining its mission and legitimacy.

6. Discussion

The framework developed in this paper demonstrates the distinctive contribution that autopoietic ecology can make to critical nonprofit studies (cf. [Eikenberry et al., 2024](#); [Dean and Wiley, 2022](#); [Coule et al., 2022](#)). Existing critiques have rightly interrogated the sector's attachment to neutrality, efficiency, and technocratic professionalism, but these analyses often remain oriented toward external moral or political benchmarks. Autopoietic ecology reframes the problem in systemic terms: neutrality appears not as the absence of bias but as a programmatic grammar that organizes organizational closure by privileging distinctions of impartiality, donor legitimacy, and procedural fairness. In this view, neutrality failure is not a deviation from an ethical ideal but a systemic outcome of relying on programs that narrow the organization's observational capacities. This recognition invites nonprofit scholars to ask new questions: How do neutrality programs structure the possibilities organizations can observe and act upon? How does legitimacy emerge from reproducing selective distinctions rather than from addressing systemic contradictions?

This perspective opens new avenues for inquiry by shifting the analytical focus from organizational intentions to the recursive operations that stabilize programs over time. If neutrality and equity are understood as conditional schemas embedded in ecologies of distinction, then research must examine the programmatic mechanisms through which nonprofits reproduce particular logics and their associated blind spots. Such an approach foregrounds the patterned ways organizations codify visibility, risk, legitimacy, and community engagement. It encourages scholars to study how neutrality becomes self-reinforcing through structural couplings with political, economic, and legal environments ([Roth and Sales, 2025](#); [Roth and Valentinov, 2020](#); [Will et al., 2018](#)), and how counter-programming emerges when existing distinctions no longer sustain organizational viability. Rather than conceptualizing nonprofits as passive actors caught between competing demands, this orientation recognizes them as autopoietic systems that actively modulate their own boundaries, constraints, and possibilities.

Seen in this light, the very process of modulation repositions social critique itself: no longer the application of external moral standards, but an operation of second-order observation. Neutrality and equity therefore appear not as opposing ethical absolutes but as programmatic logics, each with its own selective consequences. Reflexivity, moreover, is always bounded by self-reference: as [Von Foerster \(1984\)](#) observed, a system can observe only through its own operations, losing a degree of freedom in every reflexive move. NGOs do not become reflexive by adopting external mandates for justice; they become reflexive when they re-enter their own distinctions and modulate programs so that previously unmarked possibilities become observable. This framing situates organizational transformation within the endogenous dynamics of viability, where reprogramming distinction ecologies becomes necessary—not because equity is normatively superior, but because neutrality programs may cease to sustain meaningful variation under conditions of complexity.

This interdisciplinary convergence yields a particularly fertile insight for nonprofit theory: the need to reconceptualize diversity as an effect of programmatic selectivity rather than an inherent feature of the sector. Nonprofits have long been celebrated for their capacity to “serve diverse needs,” their responsiveness where markets and states fall short, and their pluralistic ethos ([Clemens, 2006](#); [Weisbrod, 1991](#); cf. [Valentinov, 2008](#)). Yet from an autopoietic ecological standpoint, diversity is not a neutral expression of social variety. It is the observable artifact of a system's distinctions—the outcome of how programs categorize need, vulnerability, and legitimacy. Who appears as a “client,” “beneficiary,” or “community member” reflects recursive selections shaped by historical patterns of exclusion, disinvestment, and institutional neglect. Neutrality programs, by presuming equivalence across populations, risk reproducing these patterned asymmetries by obscuring the structural forces that render some groups systematically more vulnerable. They stabilize grammars that recognize disparities as differences rather than as the products of racial capitalism, settler colonialism, or intersecting regimes of oppression.

Through this lens, the celebrated flexibility of nonprofits to accommodate heterogeneity becomes more ambivalent. What appears as responsiveness may, in reality, be the recursive effect of programs that filter visibility and normalize unequal exposure to harm. Neutrality, by treating differences as interchangeable, can convert diversity into a managerial abstraction—one that masks the structural conditions shaping vulnerability. An equity-driven counter-programming logic, by contrast, redraws the ecology of distinctions so that these structural conditions become visible. It destabilizes the universalistic grammar of neutrality by introducing distinctions grounded in positionality, situated knowledge, and justice-oriented accountability. In this sense, equity-driven logic does not represent a departure from systems thinking but an extension of it: a recalibration of the selective conditions through which nonprofits reproduce themselves within complex environments.

These insights underscore a broader theoretical contribution. Autopoietic ecology illuminates nonprofits not as neutral intermediaries within pluralist democracies but as potential architects of systemic modulation. Their viability depends on their capacity to observe when existing programs—whether neutrality, efficiency, or technocratic legitimacy—have become too rigid to address the complexity of contemporary crises. Reflexivity thus becomes central, not as a moral aspiration but as a structural necessity: organizations that cannot re-enter and recalibrate their distinctions risk losing alignment with the environments to which they are structurally coupled. This dynamic reframes the sector's long-standing flexibility in a new theoretical light. Flexibility is not an inherent virtue but a function of programmatic openness, the capacity to modulate the marked and unmarked spaces that guide decisions. Where neutrality programs foreclose such modulation, nonprofits may appear stable yet remain trapped in patterns that perpetuate inequality. Where counter-programming expands the ecology of distinctions, diversity becomes a generative site of systemic renewal rather than a cosmetic expression of inclusivity.

Ultimately, the analysis developed here positions neutrality and equity not as moral opposites but as programmatic orientations with distinct implications for viability. Neutrality offers the comfort of predictability, institutional legitimacy, and risk minimization, but it may also entrench blind spots that compromise long-term resonance with affected communities. Equity-driven programs, while more exposed to political contestation, open possibilities for reconfiguring the very conditions under which nonprofits maintain themselves. Autopoietic ecology shows that systemic transformation does not hinge on external moral imperatives but on the internal capacity of organizations to modulate their constraint ecologies under conditions of complexity. Only by cultivating such reflexive re-entry—bounded, partial, and endogenous—can nonprofits transform diversity from a managerial idiom into a productive horizon for structural change.

7. Conclusion

This paper has advanced a systemic framework for understanding how nonprofit organizations—especially in crisis contexts—may reproduce structural inequities through their adherence to neutrality. Drawing on [Watson and Brezovec's \(2025\)](#) autopoietic ecology, we reconceptualized neutrality not as the absence of politics but as a programmatic logic: a structured set of distinctions that stabilizes organizational operations by encoding expectations of legitimacy, impartiality, and risk-aversion. Such programs enable continuity under conditions of uncertainty, yet they also delimit what nonprofits can observe and do. By narrowing the ecological space of possible distinctions, neutrality may obscure the patterned vulnerabilities that crises inevitably amplify. The concept of nonprofit neutrality failure captures this dynamic: a condition in which neutrality programs that once secured access, legitimacy, and operational stability no longer sustain viable engagement with complex, inequitable environments.

Our analysis shows that neutrality failure is not a matter of organizational intent, goodwill, or ethical failing. It arises from the closure of the program itself—the self-reinforcing

reproduction of a selective grammar that filters out structural causes of harm, forecloses advocacy, and limits responsiveness to communities most affected by intersecting forms of oppression. Against this backdrop, we articulated equity-driven logic as a form of counter-programming. Counter-programming does not replace service delivery nor impose an external justice mandate on nonprofits. Instead, it re-enters organizational operations with alternative distinctions—positionality, accountability, systemic redress—that destabilize neutrality’s universalist grammar and expand the horizon of possible action. Equity-driven logic constitutes a recursive reconfiguration of viability, enabling nonprofits to detect and modulate the structural conditions that shape vulnerability. In this view, transformation emerges not through normative critique from outside but through the system’s own capacity to recalibrate its distinction ecology.

The implications are both theoretical and practical. Theoretically, this framework extends the critical turn in nonprofit studies by situating power and inequality within autopoietic processes of program formation, re-entry, and modulation. It reconceptualizes nonprofits not as morally charged actors but as self-reproducing systems whose patterns of observation shape the visibility of injustice. Practically, the framework offers a diagnostic compass: it enables organizations, funders, and policymakers to recognize when neutrality programs have become disabling, when reflexive re-entry is required, and how equity-driven counter-programming may reopen pathways for systemic responsiveness. Rather than demanding political activism from all nonprofits, the model identifies the conditions under which programs cease to sustain viability—and the recursive adjustments necessary for renewed relevance.

In an era defined by climate emergencies, democratic erosion, forced displacement, and widening social inequalities, the stakes of nonprofit engagement are profound. Whether nonprofits primarily stabilize existing hierarchies or participate in reconfiguring the ecologies of exclusion and vulnerability hinges on their capacity for bounded reflexivity: the ability to observe and re-draw the distinctions through which they constitute meaning and action. Neutrality failure thus becomes not merely a problem but a signal—an indication that the selective grammar guiding organizational operations has reached its limits. To remain viable under deepening complexity, nonprofits must move beyond neutrality’s closure and cultivate the counter-programmatic logics through which equity becomes not a moral aspiration but a systemic condition for future-oriented practice.

AI disclosure

The authors have used ChatGPT for spellchecking and wording improvement purposes.

Author disclosure

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Corresponding author

Vladislav Valentinov can be contacted at: valentinov@iamo.de

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