

Principled resilience in NGOs: a values-driven conceptual framework for sustaining mission integrity amid paradox and uncertainty

Erhan Atay

Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual paper aims to develop the notion of principled resilience – a values-driven framework explaining how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and mission-oriented organizations sustain mission integrity, legitimacy and ethical consistency amid financial constraint, accountability pressure and organizational paradox. It addresses the limits of performance-centric resilience models by reframing resilience as a responsibility-oriented capability rather than a reactive response to disruption.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper conceptually integrates paradox theory and resilience-as-practice to build a values-anchored model of responsible organizational adaptation. It identifies three interdependent capacities – mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence – that collectively define principled resilience as both an ethical and adaptive system for sustaining legitimacy in uncertain environments.

Findings – Principled resilience explains how organizations navigate tensions between short-term accountability demands and long-term social commitments. It shows that true resilience emerges not merely from adaptive capacity but from embedding responsibility, reflection and value coherence into governance, decision-making and stakeholder engagement practices.

Research limitations/implications – As a conceptual study, the framework requires empirical validation. Future research could examine its propositions across diverse institutional and cultural contexts, assessing how mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence jointly influence legitimacy, stakeholder trust and societal outcomes.

Practical implications – The framework equips leaders, donors and policymakers with tools to institutionalize responsibility and moral integrity within governance. By embedding mission fidelity into processes and resisting overreliance on short-term metrics, organizations can strengthen stakeholder confidence and sustain credibility while adapting to uncertainty and resource volatility.

Social implications – Principled resilience enables organizations to balance accountability with ethical commitments, supporting trust-based relationships and long-term societal value – especially in hybrid and legitimacy-sensitive environments.

Originality/value – This paper offers a novel conceptualization of resilience that foregrounds values, legitimacy and responsibility as foundations of organizational endurance. It extends paradox theory and resilience-as-practice while providing a coherent, empirically testable framework for responsible governance and sustainable social impact. In governance terms, the framework specifies how value-aligned routines (process orientation) and metric discipline (outcome independence) operate as governance mechanisms that protect mission integrity and legitimacy under accountability pressure.

Keywords Principled resilience, Mission fidelity, Responsible governance, Ethical consistency, Stakeholder trust, CSR, NGOs

Paper type Conceptual paper

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Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are established to fulfill moral and social mandates – promoting equity, humanitarian assistance and the public good – often stepping in where markets and states fall short (Banks *et al.*, 2015). Beyond service delivery, NGOs have become central actors in advancing social responsibility, mediating between communities, states and international donors. Yet, paradoxically, these organizations increasingly operate under accountability regimes shaped by commercial and bureaucratic logics. Funders and regulators demand quantifiable outputs and audit-ready results (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Grimes *et al.*, 2019). While intended to ensure effectiveness and transparency, these performance pressures can undermine ethical consistency and legitimacy, resulting in mission drift and organizational strain (Pache and Santos, 2013; Battilana and Dorado, 2010). Research shows that NGOs perceive accountability as both a necessity and a burden, adopting diverse strategies to balance compliance with their broader social commitments (AbouAssi and Trent, 2016). These dilemmas are intensified by marketization trends that transform aid relationships into transactional contracts (Brunt and Casey, 2022) and by pressures toward commercialization as a means of organizational survival (Balgah *et al.*, 2024).

Despite the growing sophistication of accountability mechanisms, many NGOs operate amid chronic financial volatility, shrinking civic space and escalating donor scrutiny – conditions that place mission integrity and legitimacy at risk (Banks *et al.*, 2015; Moldavanova *et al.*, 2023; Grimes *et al.*, 2019). This tension between financial efficiency and ethical responsibility reveals a critical research gap: existing resilience frameworks remain predominantly performance-oriented, emphasizing recovery and efficiency rather than the preservation of moral purpose (Maier *et al.*, 2016; Duchek, 2020; Whitman, 2023). The result is an incomplete understanding of how mission-driven organizations sustain legitimacy when economic survival and ethical coherence are simultaneously at stake. Addressing this gap, the present paper introduces a values-driven model of resilience that foregrounds integrity, responsibility and stakeholder trust as central to organizational endurance (Smith and Besharov, 2019; Whitman, 2023).

This contradiction – between value-driven purpose and externally imposed performance criteria – reflects a broader challenge of organizational responsibility in development governance. Paradox theory frames such tensions as inevitable, requiring constructive engagement rather than resolution (Smith and Lewis, 2011). NGOs must hold together legitimacy and responsiveness, donor accountability and beneficiary needs, short-term outputs and long-term transformation. When organizations default to compliance or short-termism, they risk eroding not only mission integrity but also stakeholder trust (Grimes *et al.*, 2019; Fang *et al.*, 2020; Boomsma and O'Dwyer, 2019). These tensions are evident in hybrid forms of advocacy (Kumi and Saharan, 2022), institutional cooperation (Iao-Jørgensen, 2024) and government–NGO partnerships where power asymmetries shape responsibility outcomes (Hummel and Kusumasari, 2024).

Many NGOs today operate within hybrid institutional contexts that combine state, market and civil-society logics (Battilana and Dorado, 2010; Pache and Santos, 2013). Such hybridity reflects the convergence of moral and instrumental imperatives – balancing social missions with financial and administrative accountability. This institutional hybridization produces paradoxical tensions that require NGOs to navigate competing accountability demands while maintaining value coherence and stakeholder legitimacy. In democratizing societies where civic spaces are shrinking, these tensions acquire a distinctly political dimension: NGOs must not only adapt operationally but also politically, safeguarding their advocacy roles and ethical voice under restrictive governance conditions. Hence, resilience in such contexts is both organizational and political, involving the preservation of moral integrity amid shifting institutional power structures.

Recent resilience research has examined how NGOs absorb shocks and maintain continuity (Williams *et al.*, 2017; Duchek, 2020). Yet dominant models often equate resilience with financial survival or operational agility – measures that are insufficient when legitimacy and responsibility determine long-term contribution. Periods of fiscal stress and political uncertainty expose NGOs to acute dilemmas, forcing them to navigate trade-offs between efficiency imperatives and mission fidelity. Such performance-centric approaches risk reducing resilience to technical recovery, rather than safeguarding ethical purpose (Maier *et al.*, 2016; Mutongwizo, 2018). Donor engagement and localization agendas further complicate these dynamics, creating both opportunities for accountability and new legitimacy dilemmas (Hallock *et al.*, 2025; Mohsin Ali and Moule, 2025).

Emerging perspectives – particularly resilience-as-practice – shift attention toward resilience as an enacted process embedded in organizational routines (Gherardi, 2012; Sellberg *et al.*, 2018). For NGOs, effectiveness and credibility hinge not only on adaptability but also on the ability to maintain coherence with core values. Reflective practices, micro-decision-making and shared commitments foster adaptive capacity without ethical compromise (Searing *et al.*, 2023; Young *et al.*, 2025; Woznyj *et al.*, 2024). Collaborative networks further enhance resilience by strengthening shared missions and trust (Guo *et al.*, 2025). This aligns with findings from Ghana and Bangladesh, where NGOs relied on community networks and domestic resource strategies to buffer external shocks while sustaining legitimacy (Kumi, 2022; Badruzzaman, 2023).

In fragile political environments, NGOs confront intensified dilemmas in protecting mission fidelity while meeting donor requirements (Tam and Hasmath, 2015). Scholars have, therefore, called for frameworks that move beyond managerial fixes to foreground values, responsibility and legitimacy as foundations of resilience (Whitman, 2023; Smith and Besharov, 2019). Shrinking civic spaces in democratizing societies (Moldavanova *et al.*, 2023; Zook *et al.*, 2023) highlight that resilience is not only organizational but also political, with direct implications for accountability and trust.

By highlighting the interplay between financial constraint, ethical responsibility and legitimacy preservation, the paper responds to the need for frameworks that foreground values and responsibility as integral to resilience. This responds directly to the call for conceptual clarity on how NGOs can sustain mission integrity in contexts where technical efficiency and moral purpose frequently collide.

Positioning our contribution

This conceptual paper responds to that call by introducing principled resilience – a values-anchored framework for understanding how NGOs and socially responsible organizations sustain legitimacy under uncertainty. Building on paradox theory and resilience-as-practice, the framework advances three interrelated components: mission fidelity or the organization's unwavering commitment to core values; process orientation, which embeds responsibility into daily governance and routines; and outcome independence, which resists overemphasis on short-term metrics in favor of long-term societal value. Taken together, these elements define principled resilience as a processual and ethical capability – one that equips organizations to adapt without compromising integrity, responsibility or stakeholder trust.

Following Gilson and Goldberg (2015), this study is conceptual in nature, seeking not to collect or analyze data but to integrate and extend existing theories through logical and theoretically grounded relationships. Conceptual papers, as Gilson and Goldberg note, “bridge literatures, offer integrated frameworks and propose new linkages among constructs rather than merely summarizing existing work.” In this spirit, the present paper synthesizes paradox theory and resilience-as-practice to develop a values-driven framework of principled resilience. By focusing on how NGOs sustain mission integrity and

ethical consistency through the interaction of mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence, the paper contributes a novel integrative perspective distinct from related ideas such as ethical leadership, adaptive governance or mission integrity alone. Principled resilience is not synonymous with ethical leadership, which primarily locates moral agency in leaders rather than in organizational routines and governance processes. Nor is it equivalent to adaptive governance, which emphasizes structural responsiveness without necessarily safeguarding value coherence under pressure. Finally, it is not a performance-centric resilience capability focused on recovery or efficiency; instead, it foregrounds responsible adaptation anchored in mission integrity, legitimacy and stakeholder trust.

While earlier research has examined mission drift and adaptive capacity separately, this framework integrates them into a unified conceptualization of responsibility-oriented resilience. It contributes theoretically by reconceptualizing resilience as a values-driven practice, and practically by equipping leaders, donors and policymakers with tools for embedding responsibility into governance and sustaining legitimacy in complex, resource-constrained environments.

Theoretical foundations

Paradox theory

Nonprofit organizations (NGOs) operate in increasingly complex and dynamic institutional landscapes. These environments often produce persistent, competing demands – such as balancing social impact with financial sustainability, maintaining stakeholder responsiveness while adhering to formal structures and aligning donor expectations with community needs. Rather than viewing these contradictions as problems to be solved, paradox theory frames them as enduring tensions that, when actively engaged, can foster innovation, legitimacy and long-term resilience (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Such paradoxes are evident in the way NGOs juggle advocacy and service delivery roles in hybrid contexts (Kumi and Saharan, 2022) or when collaboration with governments creates both opportunities and new dependencies (Hummel and Kusumasari, 2024).

Paradox theory defines organizational tensions as “contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time” (Lewis, 2000). These tensions often manifest in performing paradoxes (e.g. efficiency vs flexibility), belonging paradoxes (e.g. identity vs diversity) and organizing paradoxes (e.g. centralization vs decentralization) (Schad *et al.*, 2016). Rather than resolving these contradictions, leaders and organizations can learn to accept and engage them through “both-and” strategies, allowing for simultaneous commitment to opposing forces. For instance, citizen participation initiatives in Vietnam illustrate how community engagement and bureaucratic structures coexist in tension but also reinforce one another when managed effectively (Nguyen *et al.*, 2015).

Mechanistically, paradox navigation unfolds through both paradox cognition and paradox practices. Paradox cognition refers to organizational actors' capacity to recognize tensions as persistent, interdependent and potentially generative rather than as problems requiring either-or resolution. This cognitive orientation enables leaders and members to reframe competing demands as mutually enabling rather than mutually exclusive. Paradox practices, in turn, refer to the concrete organizational routines that operationalize “both-and” responses – such as structured reflection, deliberative governance forums, stakeholder dialogue mechanisms and temporal cycling between short-term and long-term priorities. Together, paradox cognition and paradox practices explain how NGOs sustain simultaneous commitments to accountability and mission integrity. In the context of principled resilience, these mechanisms clarify how mission fidelity is preserved while process adaptations and outcome pressures are actively managed without collapsing into compliance-oriented short-termism.

In the nonprofit and hybrid sectors, paradoxes are structural – emerging from the coexistence of multiple institutional logics, including mission-driven, bureaucratic and market-based imperatives (Smith and Besharov, 2019). Pache and Santos (2013) describe how hybrid organizations selectively couple elements from competing institutional logics, crafting coherent identities while responding to conflicting demands. These tensions can be navigated – not eliminated – through reflective leadership and adaptive design. Empirical studies also show how institutional hybridization in development cooperation requires NGOs to constantly mediate between donor, state and community logics (Iao-Jørgensen, 2024).

Jarzabkowski *et al.* (2013) further show that organizing, performing and belonging paradoxes coevolve as organizations respond to external demands, identity pressures and strategic trade-offs. Their work underscores that resilience emerges not from static balance, but from dynamic engagement with evolving contradictions.

For example, research suggests that organizations confronting competing institutional demands often manage tensions by selectively combining practices associated with different institutional logics in order to maintain legitimacy across diverse audiences (Zhao *et al.*, 2017). Similarly, Battilana and Lee (2014) argue that paradoxical tensions in hybrid organizing – such as profit vs purpose – are navigated through deliberate design of organizational structures and roles that buffer or integrate conflicting demands. Relatedly, Gümüşay *et al.* (2020) show how organizations engage incompatible institutional logics through “elastic hybridity,” enabling the coexistence of multiple value commitments within hybrid organizational forms. In social enterprises, such navigation often leads to novel governance forms and hybrid identities that can sustain both impact and stability. Comparable tensions are evident in South Korea, where social enterprises balance state funding and market incentives with social mission goals, often facing trade-offs between financial sustainability and social performance (Kim and Moon, 2017).

A growing body of research focuses on paradoxes in nonprofit governance and organizational learning. Van Puyvelde *et al.* (2012) apply paradox theory to explain how nonprofit boards manage the competing demands of control vs collaboration, short-term oversight vs long-term mission and internal vs external accountability. These tensions are rarely resolved but must be navigated with flexible governance practices. Studies of aid partnerships similarly highlight paradoxical governance: partnerships can provide stability while at the same time reproducing power asymmetries that undermine NGO autonomy (Beisheim *et al.*, 2018).

Smith and Besharov (2019) introduce the idea of “structured flexibility” as a way for organizations to simultaneously honor competing logics. This concept is especially applicable in NGOs, where maintaining donor accountability while remaining community-grounded often requires organizational hybridity. Structured flexibility becomes a means to preserve dual commitments without compromising legitimacy.

Boomsma and O'Dwyer (2019) complement this view by showing how accountability frameworks themselves shape NGO conduct, producing new paradoxes where compliance efforts may conflict with ethical mission delivery. Their findings reveal the deep entanglement of governance structures in sustaining or straining paradox navigation. Recent work further demonstrates that shrinking civic space intensifies these paradoxes, as NGOs attempt to meet donor and state expectations while defending autonomy and community trust (Zook *et al.*, 2023; Moldavanova *et al.*, 2023).

Finally, paradox theory contributes directly to discussions of resilience. Rather than viewing resilience as “bouncing back” from disruption, scholars now emphasize resilience as the ability to navigate and sustain contradictions in dynamic environments (Smith and Lewis, 2011). In this sense, NGOs are resilient not because they resolve paradoxes, but because they develop capacities to hold competing demands in productive tension – a core feature

of what we call principled resilience. This connection positions paradox theory as a critical foundation for understanding how NGOs can remain mission-consistent while responding adaptively to external pressures. This insight is reinforced by research on localization, which shows how aid flows and donor strategies simultaneously empower and constrain local NGOs, producing enduring paradoxes of dependence and autonomy (Herrold, 2025; Hallock *et al.*, 2025).

Resilience-as-practice and mission fidelity in non-governmental organizations

Resilience has become a cornerstone concept in organizational studies, capturing how institutions adapt, endure and transform in response to adversity. Traditional conceptions of resilience often emphasize organizational performance, resource reconfiguration and continuity under crisis (Duchek, 2020; Williams *et al.*, 2017). In these models, resilience is predominantly understood as a reactive trait or outcome: the ability to bounce back, recover functionality or maintain performance metrics during periods of disruption (Vogus and Sutcliffe, 2007; Ilseven and Puranam, 2021). While such perspectives are well-suited to commercial organizations prioritizing efficiency and profit, they fall short in capturing the unique dynamics of mission-driven NGOs, where organizational legitimacy and survival hinge not only on performance, but on ethical coherence and long-term societal purpose (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Barasa *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, the challenge for NGOs is compounded by donor engagement practices that can reshape bureaucratic ambition and institutional motivation, thereby influencing how resilience is defined and enacted (Mohsin Ali and Moule, 2025).

In NGOs, the concept of resilience requires reframing. These organizations routinely operate in environments marked by uncertainty, resource volatility, political constraints and overlapping stakeholder demands (Grimes *et al.*, 2019; Appe, 2019). Yet their resilience cannot be solely judged by their ability to maintain funding or service delivery. Rather, it must be assessed in relation to their capacity to preserve and enact their founding mission – often grounded in principles of equity, justice and social transformation – despite external pressures (Ramus *et al.*, 2017; Kim *et al.*, 2022). This is particularly relevant in contexts of closing civic space, where NGOs must navigate restrictions imposed by governments and international actors while sustaining their mission commitments (Zook *et al.*, 2023; Moldavanova *et al.*, 2023).

To this end, resilience-as-practice offers a more fitting conceptual lens. It shifts attention from resilience as a static capacity to resilience as an enacted, situated process embedded in the daily work and identity of the organization (Gherardi, 2012; Sellberg *et al.*, 2018). From this perspective, resilience is not something an organization has but something it does. It unfolds in real time, through decisions, relationships, routines and interpretations that allow the organization to maintain coherence in the face of evolving threats (McGreavy, 2016; Wagenaar and Wilkinson, 2015). Case studies of institutional hybridization show that resilience is enacted precisely through everyday compromises between state, donor and community logics, requiring NGOs to balance responsiveness with autonomy (Iao-Jørgensen, 2024).

In NGO contexts, resilience-as-practice centers on the concept of mission fidelity – the ability to stay aligned with core values and purposes over time, even while adapting structurally or strategically. Mission fidelity becomes both the evaluative standard and organizing mechanism of principled resilience. Unlike output-based metrics that emphasize growth or survival, mission fidelity foregrounds the ethical and ideological commitments that legitimize NGOs' work and distinguish them from market or state actors (Banks *et al.*, 2015; Grimes *et al.*, 2019). For example, nonprofits in Kenya have shown how partnership arrangements can enhance resilience if power is distributed equitably, but can equally constrain mission fidelity when asymmetries dominate (Beisheim *et al.*, 2018).

Research affirms that this mission-anchored approach to resilience is critical to nonprofit sustainability. Woznyj *et al.* (2024) find that nonprofit organizations with shared-mission

networks and a culture of organizational humility exhibit greater resilience than those pursuing opportunistic growth. Similarly, [Herrero and Kraemer \(2022\)](#) demonstrate how cultural nonprofits during the COVID-19 pandemic sustained their operations through emotionally grounded practices tied to community service and identity reinforcement. These studies suggest that ethical coherence and emotional commitment – not just operational agility – are essential to organizational endurance. Comparable dynamics appear in social enterprises in South Korea, where funding and management structures strongly influence whether resilience strengthens social missions or reinforces economic logics ([Kim and Moon, 2017](#)).

Additional studies echo this processual and mission-centric view. [Searing et al. \(2023\)](#) propose a nonprofit resilience framework grounded in financial adaptation, relational trust and identity continuity. [Meyer et al. \(2023\)](#) document how post-disaster recovery organizations navigated long-term uncertainty by embedding their mission in localized, flexible structures. [Waerder et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight the role of cross-sector collaborations in buffering NGOs against environmental shocks while maintaining strategic clarity. Similarly, research on nonprofit commercialization highlights how leaders' perceptions of market strategies can shape whether commercialization undermines or reinforces resilience ([Balgah et al., 2024](#)). Studies of domestic resource mobilization in Ghana further show that resilience is tied to local strategies that reduce donor dependence while reinforcing mission orientation ([Kumi, 2022](#)). These insights collectively underscore that resilience for NGOs is not an abstract capacity but a living practice rooted in purpose.

From a theoretical standpoint, this reframing aligns with process theories of organization, which conceptualize institutions as ongoing accomplishments constituted through flows of activity, interpretation and relational engagement ([Hernes, 2014](#)). In this view, mission fidelity is not a static attribute but a continuously performed achievement – contested, reaffirmed and negotiated through practice. This understanding resonates with the organizational realities NGOs face, where stakeholder expectations, political constraints and resource dependencies constantly challenge their ethical boundaries ([Pache and Santos, 2013](#); [Raisiene and Urmanavičienė, 2017](#)). Empirical work in Vietnam, for example, demonstrates how citizen participation initiatives require NGOs to simultaneously uphold state accountability and grassroots legitimacy, revealing resilience as a negotiated and enacted practice ([Nguyen et al., 2015](#)).

Importantly, a mission-centric understanding of resilience also guards against the risk of mission drift – where adaptive responses to funder demands or performance pressures gradually shift the organization away from its founding purpose ([Cornforth, 2014](#); [Ramus et al., 2017](#)). While adaptation is necessary for survival, unmoored flexibility can erode legitimacy and stakeholder trust. Principled resilience, as developed in this paper, insists that adaptation must be guided by mission coherence and ethical integrity, not merely instrumental outcomes. Aid localization efforts illustrate this tension: while intended to empower local organizations, they can also expose NGOs to pressures that test their ability to maintain mission integrity ([Herrold, 2025](#); [Hallock et al., 2025](#)).

In sum, resilience in NGOs should be viewed not simply as capacity or outcome, but as a process enacted through daily practices that maintain alignment with core mission values under conditions of adversity. This perspective sets the foundation for the principled resilience framework, where resilience is reframed as a normative and enacted capability – one that enables NGOs to sustain their identity, trustworthiness and long-term societal impact amidst turbulence.

Principled resilience: a values-driven framework

Building on paradox theory and resilience-as-practice, this paper conceptualizes principled resilience as an integrative, values-driven framework that explains how NGOs sustain

mission integrity under conditions of uncertainty and competing demands. Rather than treating resilience as a technical capacity for adaptation, this framework views it as a normative process of responsible action anchored in core values and stakeholder trust. It thus reframes resilience as both an ethical and organizational capability that enables NGOs to navigate paradoxical tensions without compromising legitimacy.

The three dimensions of principled resilience – mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence – function as an integrated system rather than as isolated constructs. Mission fidelity provides ethical direction; process orientation embeds this integrity into organizational routines and governance; and outcome independence ensures that moral commitments are not sacrificed under external pressure. These elements operate in a continuous, reciprocal cycle of reflection and adaptation, allowing NGOs to sustain legitimacy while navigating competing performance and accountability demands. For example, an organization maintaining mission fidelity under donor pressure may use participatory decision-making processes to uphold community accountability (process orientation) while accepting delayed or uncertain outcomes (outcome independence) to preserve trust and legitimacy. This interdependence transforms principled resilience from a static attribute into a living, practice-based capability.

Components of principled resilience

Mission fidelity

Mission fidelity is the cornerstone of principled resilience, defined as the sustained alignment of organizational behavior with an NGO's founding values and long-term purpose, even under intense external pressures. For NGOs, resilience cannot be reduced to continuity of operations or technical recovery; rather, it depends on the capacity to remain faithful to purpose while navigating shifting environments. This makes mission fidelity not only a normative commitment but also a resilience practice enacted through everyday organizational choices (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Grimes *et al.*, 2019).

From the perspective of paradox theory, NGOs constantly face tensions between donor expectations and community needs, between short-term accountability and long-term transformation or between efficiency and inclusivity. Mission fidelity equips organizations to manage these paradoxes by holding competing demands in balance without compromising their core purpose (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013). Instead of choosing one side of a contradiction, fidelity allows NGOs to adapt while staying grounded in the values that legitimate their work.

Viewed through resilience-as-practice, mission fidelity is not a fixed declaration but an ongoing enactment. It is sustained in daily routines, governance decisions and frontline practices that reaffirm identity under stress (Gherardi, 2012; Sellberg *et al.*, 2018). This makes fidelity a lived process rather than a static attribute, enabling organizations to reinterpret their mission while responding to crises in ways that preserve integrity.

As an illustrative vignette drawn from documented organizational practices, BRAC, the largest NGO headquartered in Bangladesh, demonstrates how mission fidelity can be sustained under crisis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, BRAC resisted calls to suspend its women's empowerment initiatives in favor of focusing exclusively on emergency relief. Instead, it integrated pandemic response into its existing mission-oriented programming, blending immediate crisis management with long-term goals of gender equality and community development (BRAC, 2020). This illustrates how mission fidelity serves as resilience in practice: short-term adaptation is accomplished without undermining the organization's enduring commitments.

In this sense, mission fidelity anchors principled resilience by ensuring that NGO adaptability does not devolve into mission drift. It transforms resilience from being merely

about “bouncing back” into a values-driven capability – one that maintains legitimacy, trust and ethical integrity in turbulent environments.

Process orientation

Process orientation operationalizes principled resilience by embedding mission fidelity into the everyday routines, practices and governance structures of NGOs. Rather than treating resilience as a capacity activated only in times of crisis, a process orientation frames resilience as an ongoing, enacted practice that sustains organizational identity through daily decision-making and operational routines. This view is directly aligned with resilience-as-practice, which emphasizes that resilience emerges not from abstract capacities but from the ways organizations continually perform, adapt and reflect in their day-to-day operations (Gherardi, 2012; Sellberg *et al.*, 2018).

From the perspective of paradox theory, process orientation equips NGOs to navigate enduring tensions – such as balancing donor accountability with mission responsiveness or reconciling immediate service delivery with long-term social transformation. By embedding structured reflection and deliberative processes into organizational life, NGOs can hold these competing demands in balance without allowing one to eclipse the other (Smith and Lewis, 2011; Jarzabkowski *et al.*, 2013). The process, rather than the crisis, becomes the site where resilience is enacted and paradoxes are navigated.

As an illustrative vignette drawn from documented organizational practices, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), for instance, operates in humanitarian contexts characterized by acute paradoxes: the need to act quickly under crisis conditions while maintaining impartiality, independence and long-term credibility. To address these tensions, MSF has institutionalized debriefing and reflective governance procedures that require staff to continuously assess whether operational decisions remain aligned with its humanitarian principles (MSF Stockholm Evaluation Unit, 2020). In this way, process orientation ensures that adaptation under pressure does not erode the organization’s values but reinforces them.

Thus, process orientation transforms resilience into a continuous, principled practice rather than an episodic reaction. It safeguards organizational integrity by ensuring that adaptation and flexibility are always mediated through value-driven processes. As a cornerstone of principled resilience, it demonstrates that resilience is not only about what NGOs do in response to external shocks but how they do it in ways that preserve identity, legitimacy and ethical coherence over time.

Outcome independence

Outcome independence represents the ability of NGOs to sustain their commitment to mission-driven activities without becoming overdependent on externally validated, short-term results. While accountability and performance measurement remain necessary for transparency, an excessive emphasis on quantifiable outputs – such as numbers of beneficiaries reached or funds raised – can skew organizational priorities toward immediate deliverables at the expense of deeper structural change (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Banks *et al.*, 2015). In this way, outcome dependence risks driving NGOs into compliance-oriented strategies that erode long-term mission fidelity.

Paradox theory helps illuminate this tension: NGOs must constantly balance the demand for demonstrable impact with the pursuit of societal transformations that are often intangible, long-term and difficult to measure. Rather than collapsing into one side of this paradox, outcome independence enables organizations to hold both demands in play – reporting outcomes where necessary, but not allowing these to overshadow or redefine the purpose of their work (Smith and Lewis, 2011). By refusing to reduce resilience to the achievement of

immediate outputs, NGOs can maintain legitimacy while protecting their normative commitments.

From a resilience-as-practice perspective, outcome independence is enacted through everyday organizational choices that privilege values and purpose over the seductions of short-term validation. It becomes visible in budgeting decisions that sustain long-term programs despite uncertain donor cycles, in governance practices that resist mission drift and in staff cultures that measure success by alignment with purpose rather than only external benchmarks (Gherardi, 2012; Sellberg *et al.*, 2018). This positions outcome independence not as rejection of measurement, but as an enacted discipline of keeping measurement in service of mission.

As an illustrative vignette drawn from documented organizational practices, Transparency International, a leading anti-corruption NGO. Despite persistent pressure from donors and policymakers to demonstrate quick, quantifiable progress, Transparency International has consistently pursued systemic advocacy against corruption – work that unfolds over decades and resists short-term measurement. By privileging structural accountability and long-term social transformation over immediately reportable outputs, the organization demonstrates outcome independence as a practical enactment of principled resilience (Transparency International, 2021).

Ultimately, outcome independence ensures that NGO resilience is not conflated with performance metrics or short-term recovery. Instead, it secures the space for mission fidelity to be sustained through adaptive practice, allowing NGOs to remain both accountable and transformative. As such, outcome independence is indispensable to principled resilience, anchoring organizations in their ethical commitments while equipping them to navigate the paradoxes of external accountability and internal purpose.

Synthesizing paradox and practice: the logic of principled resilience

The framework of principled resilience integrates and extends two core theoretical foundations – paradox theory and resilience-as-practice – to conceptualize how NGOs can sustain mission fidelity while navigating complexity, uncertainty and external pressure.

Paradox Theory provides the foundation for understanding the persistent tensions NGOs face: donor accountability vs community responsiveness, short-term outcomes vs long-term impact and financial sustainability vs ethical integrity. Rather than resolving these contradictions through binary trade-offs, paradox theory highlights the value of “both-and” strategies that hold competing demands in productive tension over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Principled resilience advances this perspective by introducing a normative anchor – mission fidelity – that enables NGOs to navigate paradox without sacrificing their ethical identity.

Resilience-as-practice complements this by shifting the focus from resilience as a static trait or episodic crisis response to the routines, decisions and reflections through which organizations continually adapt over time (Gherardi, 2012; Witmer and Mellinger, 2016). While this lens explains how resilience is enacted in everyday practice, it does not specify toward what end. Principled resilience extends this theory by grounding enactments in ethical purpose, ensuring that adaptation strengthens rather than dilutes organizational identity.

Together, these theoretical insights converge in three dimensions – mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence – which translate paradox navigation and resilience-as-practice into a coherent framework for NGOs. In this model, resilience is not merely about organizational survival or flexibility, but about sustaining values, aligning practices and resisting outcome dependency. By synthesizing paradox theory and

resilience-as-practice, principled resilience offers a unified, values-centered account of how NGOs can remain legitimate and mission-driven in turbulent environments.

Interdependence and synergy of the dimensions

Defining these three dimensions is necessary, but establishing principled resilience as a coherent construct also requires showing how they support and reinforce one another. Though analytically distinct, mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence are interdependent in practice and generate resilience only when enacted together.

Mission fidelity provides the ethical anchor, articulating the values and long-term commitments NGOs must safeguard. Process orientation operationalizes this anchor by embedding mission-aligned decision-making into daily routines and governance structures; without such processes, fidelity risks remaining a symbolic declaration rather than a lived practice. Outcome independence safeguards both fidelity and process orientation by preventing external measurement pressures from displacing mission-driven choices.

When combined, the three dimensions create synergistic effects. Mission fidelity without process orientation may falter in practice; process orientation without outcome independence may still drift toward donor-driven metrics; and outcome independence without fidelity risks losing direction. Together, however, they reinforce one another: fidelity shapes purpose, process ensures enactment and outcome independence protects autonomy. This synergy makes principled resilience a holistic organizational capability – one that enables NGOs to adapt under pressure while sustaining identity, legitimacy and long-term societal impact.

Visual framework: the architecture of principled resilience

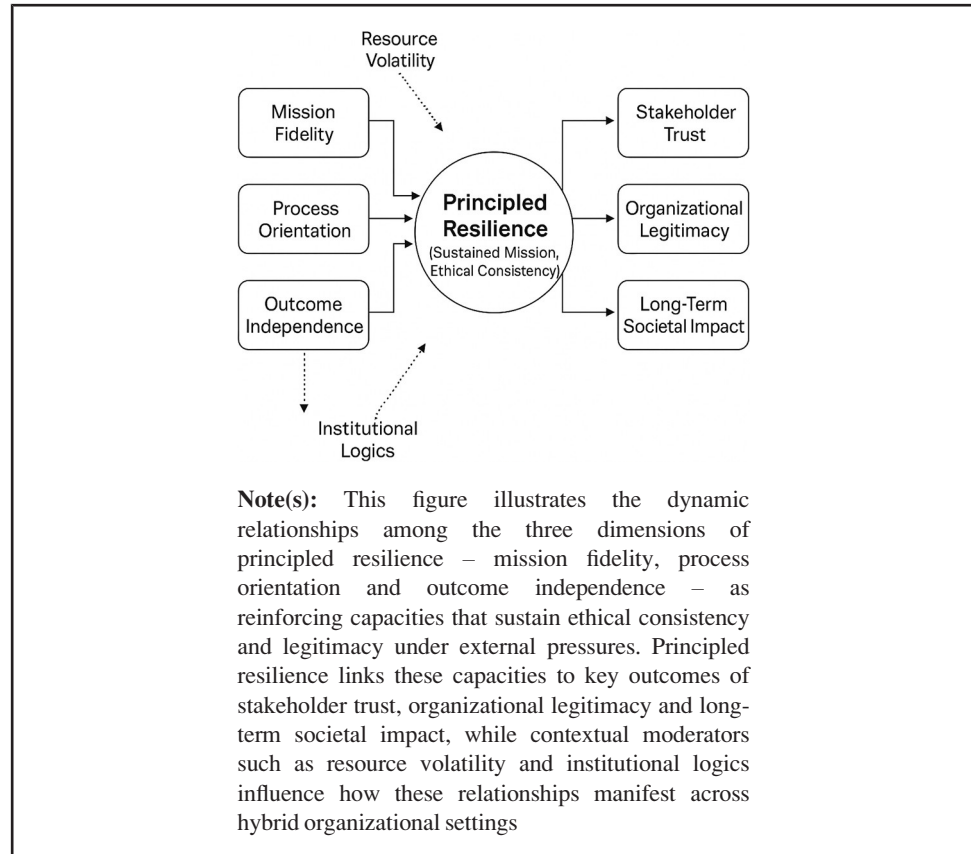
The proposed principled resilience framework illustrates how NGOs can adapt under pressure without compromising their mission. At its core lies principled resilience, defined as the sustained ability of an NGO to navigate external complexity while preserving ethical integrity and mission fidelity. This capacity is supported by three interdependent dimensions. Mission fidelity anchors the organization to its founding values and long-term commitments, ensuring that adaptation occurs without compromising identity. Process orientation embeds resilience into daily routines, reflective practices and governance systems, enabling resilience to be enacted continuously rather than reactively. Outcome independence complements these dimensions by encouraging NGOs to prioritize transformative, long-term impact over immediate but potentially distorting short-term outputs.

These three dimensions are mutually reinforcing: fidelity provides purpose, process ensures enactment and outcome independence protects autonomy. Together, they create a holistic, value-aligned system of resilience. The framework also situates NGOs within contextual pressures – such as donor expectations, institutional complexity and funding volatility – showing how paradox theory explains their navigation of contradictory demands and how resilience-as-practice accounts for the routines through which this navigation occurs. The outcomes of principled resilience are evident in the cultivation of stakeholder trust, the preservation of organizational legitimacy and the advancement of long-term societal impact. This integrative visual model, therefore, provides both theoretical clarity and practical guidance for how NGOs can remain mission-consistent in uncertain and turbulent environments (Figure 1).

Advanced theoretical propositions

To operationalize principled resilience as a research framework, we propose five testable propositions rooted in paradox theory and resilience-as-practice. These propositions link

Figure 1 Dimensions of principled resilience



the three dimensions of principled resilience – mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence – to observable organizational outcomes, offering a foundation for empirical inquiry.

Together, the three dimensions of principled resilience form an interdependent and recursive system. Mission fidelity provides normative direction; process orientation institutionalizes that direction through responsible routines; and outcome independence safeguards ethical consistency under external pressure. The following propositions articulate how these dimensions interact dynamically to sustain organizational legitimacy and stakeholder trust under paradoxical conditions, thereby enabling future empirical testing of their relationships. As depicted in [Figure 1](#), the three dimensions of principled resilience collectively sustain organizational legitimacy and stakeholder trust under paradoxical conditions. [Table 1](#) summarizes the propositions and their indicative empirical relationships:

P1. Process orientation strengthens mission fidelity under external shock.

The first proposition addresses the role of process orientation in anchoring mission fidelity during crises. NGOs that embed reflective practices, participatory governance and value-driven routines into their everyday operations are better positioned to sustain ethical commitments under external shocks. This reflects resilience-as-practice, which conceptualizes resilience not as a static attribute but as an ongoing set of actions and routines ([Gherardi, 2012](#); [Sellberg et al., 2018](#)). When process orientation institutionalizes ethical commitments, resilience is enacted continuously rather than reactively. This

Table 1 Summary of theoretical propositions and empirical indicators

<i>Proposition</i>	<i>Core idea</i>	<i>Theoretical basis</i>	<i>Indicative outcome/empirical focus</i>
<i>P1</i>	Process orientation → strengthens mission fidelity under shocks	Resilience-as-practice	Observable continuity of mission-aligned activities and stakeholder trust during crises (process indicators of value enactment)
<i>P2</i>	Outcome independence mediates donor pressure → mission fidelity	Paradox theory	Lower incidence of mission drift and stronger alignment between donor objectives and organizational values
<i>P3</i>	Principled resilience → legitimacy and trust despite output variability	Both	Higher perceived legitimacy and stakeholder confidence despite fluctuations in short-term outputs
<i>P4</i>	Principled resilience vs performance-centric → lower mission drift, maintained adaptability	Both	Greater adaptive capacity and ethical consistency compared with performance-centric models of resilience
<i>P5</i>	Interaction of three dimensions predicts principled resilience	Both	Combined influence of the Three dimensions predicts higher organizational legitimacy and long-term societal impact than any single element alone

relational dynamic suggests that process orientation not only predicts stronger mission fidelity but also amplifies outcome independence by creating organizational routines that normalize ethical reflection. Therefore, NGOs with strong process orientation will demonstrate higher mission fidelity under external shocks compared with those with weaker process orientation (Proposition 1):

P2. Outcome independence mediates the accountability–integrity relationship.

The second proposition emphasizes the mediating function of outcome independence. According to paradox theory, NGOs constantly face the tension between external accountability demands and internal mission fidelity (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Outcome independence allows organizations to resist donor-driven short-termism by prioritizing mission-aligned goals, even when these cannot be easily measured. This mediating role reduces the likelihood of mission drift, a recurring challenge for NGOs operating under funding volatility (Grimes *et al.*, 2019). By enabling organizations to decouple value-based priorities from rigid performance criteria, outcome independence transforms tension into a constructive paradox-management mechanism. Thus, outcome independence mediates the relationship between donor pressure and mission fidelity, reducing the risk of mission drift (Proposition 2):

P3. Principled resilience enhances legitimacy and trust through ethical coherence.

The third proposition connects principled resilience with legitimacy and trust. When NGOs maintain ethical coherence while navigating contradictory pressures, they project consistency to stakeholders and reinforce their credibility. Even when short-term outcomes fluctuate, the visible commitment to purpose sustains trust among donors, beneficiaries and partners. This resonates with resilience-as-practice, where legitimacy is reinforced not through episodic performance but through the enactment of enduring values (Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Process orientation and outcome independence jointly strengthen the translation of mission fidelity into perceived legitimacy, suggesting a moderated-mediation effect where ethical routines and independence jointly predict stakeholder trust. Accordingly, principled resilience is positively associated with perceived legitimacy and trust, even when short-term outputs are inconsistent (Proposition 3):

P4. Principled resilience promotes adaptive integrity relative to performance-centric models.

The fourth proposition contrasts principled resilience with outcome-dependent models of resilience. While performance-centric models define resilience in terms of efficiency or survival (Duchek, 2020), principled resilience emphasizes mission fidelity as the anchor of adaptation. NGOs guided by principled resilience are less vulnerable to mission drift and are able to

preserve their identity while still adjusting to external demands. In this sense, principled resilience offers a more sustainable form of resilience, one that maintains adaptability without compromising integrity. Empirically, this could be observed through longitudinal measures that capture the stability of core mission statements and stakeholder perceptions of authenticity during periods of external volatility. Therefore, NGOs guided by principled resilience will experience lower levels of mission drift while retaining adaptive capacity, compared with those following performance-centric resilience models (Proposition 4):

P5. The interaction of mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence predicts principled resilience.

The fifth proposition integrates the three dimensions – mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence – into a holistic model. While each capacity individually contributes to principled resilience, their interaction creates synergistic effects. Fidelity provides the ethical anchor, process ensures its enactment in daily operations and outcome independence shields both from external pressures. Together, they form a comprehensive resilience capability that cannot be explained by any single element in isolation.

This interactive influence becomes particularly salient in hybrid institutional contexts, where NGOs operate at the intersection of state, market and civil-society logics. In such environments, overlapping accountability systems amplify legitimacy tensions and expose organizations to political as well as operational pressures. The combined effect of mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence enables NGOs to maintain moral coherence and stakeholder trust even as civic spaces narrow or regulatory controls intensify. Hence, principled resilience represents not only an organizational capacity but also a political one – sustaining ethical agency and advocacy effectiveness under constrained conditions.

This interactive effect can be empirically examined through moderated-mediation or configurational models assessing how combinations of these dimensions jointly predict organizational legitimacy, stakeholder trust and adaptive sustainability. Hence, the interaction of mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence will significantly predict principled resilience, controlling for organizational size and funding diversity (Proposition 5). Future studies may also explore how this configuration performs under varying forms of hybridity (e.g. state-linked, faith-based or market-oriented NGOs) to determine the contextual limits of the framework.

Collectively, these propositions advance principled resilience as a theoretically grounded and empirically testable framework. They extend paradox theory by demonstrating how NGOs can navigate tensions without sacrificing integrity and enrich resilience-as-practice by specifying mission fidelity as the normative compass of organizational enactment. By incorporating the dynamics of hybrid contexts and civic-space constraints, the framework further highlights that principled resilience is enacted not only through internal governance but also through the preservation of ethical legitimacy in politically contested environments. Future research can apply multiple methodological pathways – such as mixed-method designs, comparative case studies and longitudinal modeling – to empirically validate these relationships across diverse NGO and hybrid contexts. For clarity, [Table 1](#) summarizes the five theoretical propositions, their core logic and expected effects. This table is intended not as repetition, but as a concise reference point for researchers seeking to operationalize principled resilience in future empirical work.

Discussion

Theoretical implications

This study advances social responsibility and resilience scholarship by introducing principled resilience as a novel, mission-anchored and processual construct for

understanding how organizations maintain ethical and strategic coherence under complex pressures. Drawing from resilience-as-practice (Gherardi, 2012; Hernes, 2014) and paradox theory (Smith and Lewis, 2011), the framework challenges performance-centric models that dominate organizational resilience research (Duchek, 2020) and foregrounds values as the foundation of responsible governance. It also complements recent work showing how shrinking civic space and restrictive donor environments complicate organizations' ability to sustain legitimacy, reinforcing the need for frameworks that integrate ethics into resilience (Zook *et al.*, 2023; Moldavanova *et al.*, 2023).

First, principled resilience reframes resilience not as episodic recovery but as an ongoing, responsibility-oriented practice. Organizations cultivate resilience through value-aligned routines, governance mechanisms and decision-making processes that preserve legitimacy and stakeholder trust. This insight extends resilience-as-practice by showing that enactment of resilience must be anchored in mission fidelity and ethical responsibility – not merely operational continuity.

Second, the framework enriches paradox theory by providing a normative pathway for navigating enduring tensions – such as short-term donor demands vs long-term societal impact or measurable performance vs mission coherence. Rather than treating these as trade-offs, principled resilience emphasizes the capacity to hold paradoxes in productive balance, with values serving as a stabilizing force. This contributes to debates on accountability and legitimacy within the broader CSR and governance literatures, where tensions between efficiency and responsibility are increasingly visible.

Third, principled resilience provides an empirically testable lens for responsible governance. By operationalizing mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence as interconnected dimensions, the framework positions resilience as a structured organizational capability rooted in responsibility and legitimacy. This moves beyond prior resilience research to highlight how organizations – particularly NGOs – can sustain ethical alignment while responding to institutional complexity, aid regimes and contested civic spaces.

Practical implications

The principled resilience framework offers actionable guidance for organizational leaders by reframing resilience as an intentional, responsibility-anchored practice rather than a reactive capacity. It encourages NGOs and other socially responsible organizations to design governance systems and cultures that integrate mission fidelity and ethical consistency alongside operational adaptability, ensuring that resilience strategies reinforce rather than erode organizational legitimacy.

From a resilience-as-practice perspective, this framework calls for institutionalizing value alignment within daily operations. Mechanisms such as structured reflection sessions, participatory decision-making forums and deliberative governance arrangements help ensure that organizational responses to external shocks remain grounded in ethical responsibility. By embedding these practices into routines, resilience becomes a proactive, continuous process rather than a one-off reaction to crisis.

Informed by paradox theory, principled resilience also provides practitioners with tools to navigate competing demands without defaulting to compromising trade-offs. When confronted with donor or stakeholder expectations that emphasize measurable short-term outcomes, leaders can use the framework to evaluate whether adaptations align with long-term social responsibilities. This legitimizes “both-and” strategies that accommodate external pressures while protecting foundational values and responsibility commitments.

Practically, the framework enhances stakeholder trust and accountability. In fragile or uncertain contexts, credibility depends less on short-term performance metrics and more

on stakeholders' perceptions of ethical consistency and purpose-driven leadership. By visibly committing to outcome independence and process orientation, organizations can reassure donors, communities and partners that they will not abandon core values even under significant strain.

In sum, principled resilience equips practitioners with a structured approach to embedding ethical responsibility into adaptation strategies. By prioritizing mission fidelity, enacting it through process orientation and safeguarding it with outcome independence, NGOs and socially responsible organizations can sustain legitimacy, stakeholder confidence and long-term societal value – even in volatile and resource-constrained environments.

Limitations and future research

While the framework of principled resilience offers a theoretically grounded model for understanding how NGOs maintain mission integrity amid paradoxical pressures, it is important to recognize the contextual and normative boundaries of its applicability. The framework was developed with NGOs and hybrid organizations that operate in legitimacy-sensitive, value-driven contexts in mind. As such, its assumptions may be less transferable to organizations whose accountability is primarily performance- or market-based.

Cultural and institutional contingencies may also influence how mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence manifest in practice. For instance, in highly politicized or resource-constrained environments, the capacity to prioritize long-term ethical consistency over immediate performance may be structurally limited. Similarly, civic space, regulatory regimes and cultural expectations about accountability can shape the operationalization of these principles.

Finally, the framework carries an implicit normative orientation by emphasizing value coherence and moral consistency as desirable outcomes. This may reflect Western-centric assumptions about transparency and stakeholder legitimacy. Future empirical research should, therefore, test these propositions across diverse socio-political and cultural settings to examine the model's robustness and adaptability. By acknowledging these boundary conditions and potential normative biases, this study strengthens the analytical precision of the principled resilience framework while offering clearer pathways for contextual validation.

Conclusion

This paper introduced principled resilience as a values-driven framework for understanding how organizations sustain ethical consistency and legitimacy amid external pressures and institutional complexity. Moving beyond outcome-dependent and performance-centric models, the framework emphasizes three interrelated components – mission fidelity, process orientation and outcome independence. Together, these elements reposition resilience as a responsibility-oriented, ethically anchored and practice-based capability rather than a reactive response to disruption.

Theoretically, the framework contributes in two key ways. First, it extends paradox theory by demonstrating how organizations can navigate enduring tensions – such as donor accountability vs community responsiveness – without resorting to compromising trade-offs. Second, it enriches resilience-as-practice by embedding resilience in everyday routines, reflective decision-making and governance processes that sustain responsibility over time. By integrating the dynamics of hybrid institutional contexts and civic-space constraints, the framework also advances understanding of how NGOs enact resilience not only as an organizational process but as a political capacity that preserves ethical agency under restrictive or contested conditions. In this way, principled resilience provides a coherent synthesis of these perspectives, offering a structured, testable and normatively grounded model of responsible organizational adaptation.

As a governance contribution, principled resilience clarifies how responsibility-oriented governance is enacted through mission-anchored decision premises, deliberative and reflective routines and safeguards against short-term metric capture. Empirically, these governance mechanisms can be examined through observable indicators such as board and stakeholder deliberation practices, decision rationales under donor pressure and patterns of mission consistency vs mission drift over time.

Practically, principled resilience equips leaders and practitioners with strategies to institutionalize ethical alignment within governance and operations. By embedding mission fidelity into daily processes and resisting overreliance on short-term metrics, organizations can navigate uncertainty, resource volatility and competing stakeholder demands while preserving legitimacy and long-term societal purpose. In hybrid and legitimacy-sensitive environments, where responsibility and trust underpin credibility, principled resilience provides a disciplined approach to ensuring that adaptation strengthens – rather than compromises – organizational identity and values.

Future research should empirically test the propositions developed here, examining the interaction effects among the three dimensions of principled resilience and exploring their application across diverse contexts and institutional logics. Comparative studies across different forms of hybridity – such as state-linked, faith-based and market-oriented NGOs – would clarify the contextual boundaries and normative assumptions of the framework. Such work would deepen understanding of how principled resilience functions as both an ethical and political practice that sustains stakeholder trust and long-term societal impact.

In an era marked by turbulence, accountability pressures and shrinking civic spaces, principled resilience offers a credible and actionable pathway for organizations to strengthen legitimacy, safeguard responsibility and deliver enduring value – without compromising who they are or what they stand for.

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