

Sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations: A TCCM-based systematic literature review and research Agenda

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Abstract: This study systematically synthesizes research on sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations (SPNPOs) and develops an agenda for future inquiry. Following PRISMA guidelines, we reviewed and analyzed 24 peer-reviewed articles indexed in Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection using the Theory-Context-Characteristics-Methodology (TCCM) framework. The literature is theoretically diverse but weakly integrated, drawing on resource-based, capability, governance, stakeholder, institutional, systems, and critical perspectives. Evidence is geographically concentrated and relies predominantly on cross-sectional designs. Resource configurations, adaptive capabilities, governance mechanisms, stakeholder relationships, and institutional conditions shape sustainable performance. A persistent mission-market tension further complicates long-term sustainability. Sustainable nonprofit performance requires an integrated understanding of internal capabilities and external embeddedness. Future research should specify nonprofit-specific boundary conditions and examine how contextual pressures influence strategic decisions and performance over time. Nonprofit leaders should combine resource diversification, adaptive capabilities, effective governance, and stakeholder engagement while safeguarding mission integrity. This study provides a structured TCCM-based synthesis of a fragmented field and identifies theoretical, contextual, and methodological gaps that support a more dynamic and context-sensitive research agenda for nonprofit sustainability. It also offers a clearer foundation for theory development and comparative, longitudinal empirical research across diverse nonprofit contexts.

Keywords: *Nonprofit management, Nonprofit organizations, Organizational sustainability, Sustainable performance, Systematic literature review, TCCM framework.*

1. Introduction

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) play an important role in contemporary societies by addressing service gaps left by both the public and private sectors. They provide essential services, goods, and forms of social welfare that might otherwise remain unmet, particularly in underserved and marginalized communities. Their significance extends beyond developing-country settings to developed contexts, where NPOs often pursue missions that are not commercially viable for private firms and may not receive sufficient political or fiscal priority from governments [1]. In addition, NPOs are frequently perceived as having a closer understanding of community needs than governmental and other institutional actors [2]. In this respect, NPOs constitute a cornerstone of sustainable development through their direct contribution to social welfare outcomes [3]. Their importance is further reflected in their economic footprint, as the sector accounts for a substantial share of global employment, estimated at 5.1% of total employment worldwide, with projections reaching 13.4%, while also representing more than half of global agricultural employment [4].

Although NPOs have been described as emergent leaders in community development [5] and as key actors in addressing complex social, economic, and environmental problems [6], sustaining

nonprofit organizational performance over time remains a persistent challenge. This challenge is shaped by distinctive structural conditions that constrain the ability of NPOs to maintain sustainable performance [1]. Unlike for-profit firms, nonprofit organizations operate under a non-distribution constraint and therefore cannot rely on retained profits as a routine mechanism of organizational continuity [7]. Unlike public agencies, they also typically lack stable tax-based funding and instead depend on more uncertain combinations of donations, grants, and earned income [8]. Consequently, sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations (SPNPOs) is shaped by an enduring tension between mission fulfillment and financial viability, a tension widely captured in the literature as mission-market tension or the double bottom line [9, 10].

Within the broader management literature, sustainable performance is commonly conceptualized through the triple bottom line dimensions of environmental, social, and economic performance [11, 12]. In the nonprofit context, however, the concept extends beyond this formulation to include the simultaneous achievement of mission-related impact and organizational continuity [13]. Accordingly, SPNPOs are often understood in terms of long-term survivability and continuity, referring to an organization's ability to meet present and future needs while maintaining its core commitments [14]. This condition is realized when organizations are able to secure stable flows of financial, human, and other critical resources while sustaining mission achievement and strong relationships with key stakeholders [15, 16].

Despite growing scholarly attention, the literature on SPNPOs remains fragmented in both conceptualization and empirical focus. Existing studies often examine the phenomenon through isolated perspectives, with limited integration of the diverse organizational practices and conditions that underpin long-term sustainability [17]. In developing countries, the sustainability of local NGOs remains a pressing concern [18], while in developed contexts, the tension between mission and financial imperatives continues to challenge both practitioners and scholars [19]. Moreover, studies indicate that sustainability challenges remain insufficiently addressed [20]. From a theoretical perspective, research on SPNPOs spans multiple frameworks yet lacks a unified analytical structure [21]. This fragmentation is compounded by a geographical imbalance in the literature, with limited representation of perspectives from the Global South [22]. Earlier contributions likewise noted the fragmented nature of this field [1], while Witmer and Mellinger [23] explicitly identified a persistent gap in understanding the sustainable performance of nonprofit organizations.

Against this background, a comprehensive and integrative synthesis of the SPNPO literature is needed. This study addresses that need through a systematic review of the existing body of research, bringing together diverse theoretical and empirical perspectives to examine SPNPOs through multiple analytical lenses. The study contributes in two ways. First, it maps the field using the TCCM framework to identify the dominant theories, contexts, characteristics, and methodologies that have shaped existing scholarship. Second, by systematically synthesizing these dimensions, the study develops a coherent understanding of SPNPOs and provides a foundation for theoretical integration, richer contextual comparison, and more robust longitudinal inquiry.

2. Research Methodology

A systematic literature review is adopted because scholarship on nonprofit sustainability remains fragmented across theoretical perspectives, operational definitions, and empirical settings [1, 24]. As a methodological approach, systematic reviews provide a rigorous, transparent, and replicable means of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing prior studies through structured procedures, thereby reducing bias and strengthening the reliability of evidence synthesis [25-27].

To structure the analysis, the study applies the TCCM framework, which offers a robust basis for organizing and synthesizing existing scholarship [28]. The TCCM framework enables a comprehensive assessment of four core dimensions of prior research: the theoretical foundations guiding the literature (Theory), the settings in which studies are conducted (Context), the principal constructs and variables under investigation (Characteristics), and the research designs and analytical techniques employed

(Methodology). By systematically mapping these dimensions, the framework clarifies the intellectual structure of the field and facilitates the identification of conceptual, contextual, and methodological gaps.

2.1. Identification

The identification stage followed established methodological guidance for systematic literature reviews to ensure a transparent and comprehensive search strategy. Systematic review protocols recommend that keyword selection reflect the core constructs of the research question [25]. Accordingly, the search strategy was developed by identifying the study's primary constructs, namely sustainable performance and nonprofit organizations, and then expanding these constructs through relevant synonyms commonly used in prior literature, consistent with recommended approaches to systematic search development [29].

The first keyword block captured the concept of sustainable performance at the organizational level. Prior studies have used several closely related terms to refer to sustainable performance constructs, including sustainable performance, sustainability performance, sustainable organizational performance, and organizational sustainability [30, 31]. These terms were selected because they refer directly to overall organizational sustainable performance rather than to isolated sustainability dimensions. The second keyword block represented the nonprofit organizational context. Because terminology for nonprofit organizations varies considerably across countries and disciplinary traditions, multiple synonymous expressions were incorporated to ensure broad coverage of the literature. Commonly used terms include nonprofit organization, non-profit organization, not-for-profit organization, non-governmental organization, NGO, NPO, third sector, voluntary organization, and charitable organization [3, 32, 33]. Plural forms and abbreviations were also incorporated to maximize retrieval.

Following this procedure, the final search strategy combined sustainable performance terms with nonprofit-sector terminology using Boolean operators, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Database search strings and retrieval results.

Database	Search string	Results
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY(("sustainable performance" OR "sustainability performance" OR "sustainable organizational performance" OR "organizational sustainability" OR "organizational sustainability performance") AND ("nonprofit organization" OR "nonprofit organizations" OR "non-profit organization" OR "non-profit organizations" OR "not-for-profit organization" OR "not-for-profit organizations" OR "nonprofit sector" OR "non-profit sector" OR "non-governmental organization" OR "non-governmental organizations" OR NGO OR NGOs OR NPO OR NPOs OR "third sector" OR "voluntary organization" OR "voluntary organizations" OR "charitable organization" OR "charitable organizations")) AND (LIMIT-TO(DOCTYPE, "ar")) AND (LIMIT-TO(LANGUAGE, "English"))	85 documents
Web of Science Core Collection	TS=(("sustainable performance" OR "sustainability performance" OR "sustainable organizational performance" OR "organizational sustainability" OR "organizational sustainability performance") AND ("nonprofit organization" OR "nonprofit organizations" OR "non-profit organization" OR "non-profit organizations" OR "not-for-profit organization" OR "not-for-profit organizations" OR "nonprofit sector" OR "non-profit sector" OR "non-governmental organization" OR "non-governmental organizations" OR NGO OR NGOs OR NPO OR NPOs OR "third sector" OR "voluntary organization" OR "voluntary organizations" OR "charitable organization" OR "charitable organizations")) AND LA=(English) AND DT=(Article)	56 documents

The search queries were applied to titles, abstracts, and keywords to ensure that retrieved studies explicitly addressed sustainability within nonprofit contexts. To ensure broad coverage of high-quality scholarly literature, the search was conducted in Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection. These databases were selected because they are among the most established and widely used multidisciplinary citation databases, offering broad coverage of peer-reviewed journals [34, 35]. The search was limited to peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. No temporal restriction was imposed to capture the full development of research on SPNPOs.

Application of the search strategy yielded 85 records in Scopus and 56 records in the Web of Science Core Collection. Together, these records constituted the initial dataset for the PRISMA screening process, as shown in Figure 1.

2.2. Screening

The screening stage was undertaken to refine the initial dataset and retain only studies directly relevant to SPNPOs. In line with established systematic review standards, inclusion and exclusion criteria were defined prior to screening to ensure transparency, consistency, and methodological rigor in the selection process [26, 27]. To be included, studies had to be peer-reviewed journal articles published in English. In addition, they had to explicitly examine nonprofit organizations and address sustainability, sustainable performance, or organizational sustainability. Both conceptual and empirical studies were considered eligible. Studies were excluded if they focused on for-profit organizations, addressed sustainability only at the macro or policy level without clear organizational relevance, or mentioned sustainability only tangentially without analyzing organizational performance.

Following PRISMA guidelines [25], the screening process was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved screening titles and abstracts to remove clearly irrelevant studies. At this stage, 60 records were excluded, and 33 studies were retained for further evaluation. The excluded records were retrieved because they contained terms such as nonprofit organizations or sustainable performance in their titles, abstracts, or keywords, but they did not examine sustainability at the organizational level. Instead, they referred to nonprofit organizations in connection with broader macroeconomic debates, public policy discussions, or sector-level development issues. They were therefore excluded because they did not directly address SPNPOs.

Review articles were also excluded from the final sample to avoid duplication of evidence and maintain the focus on primary research contributions [26, 27]. The remaining studies were then subjected to full-text assessment to determine their final eligibility for inclusion in the review.

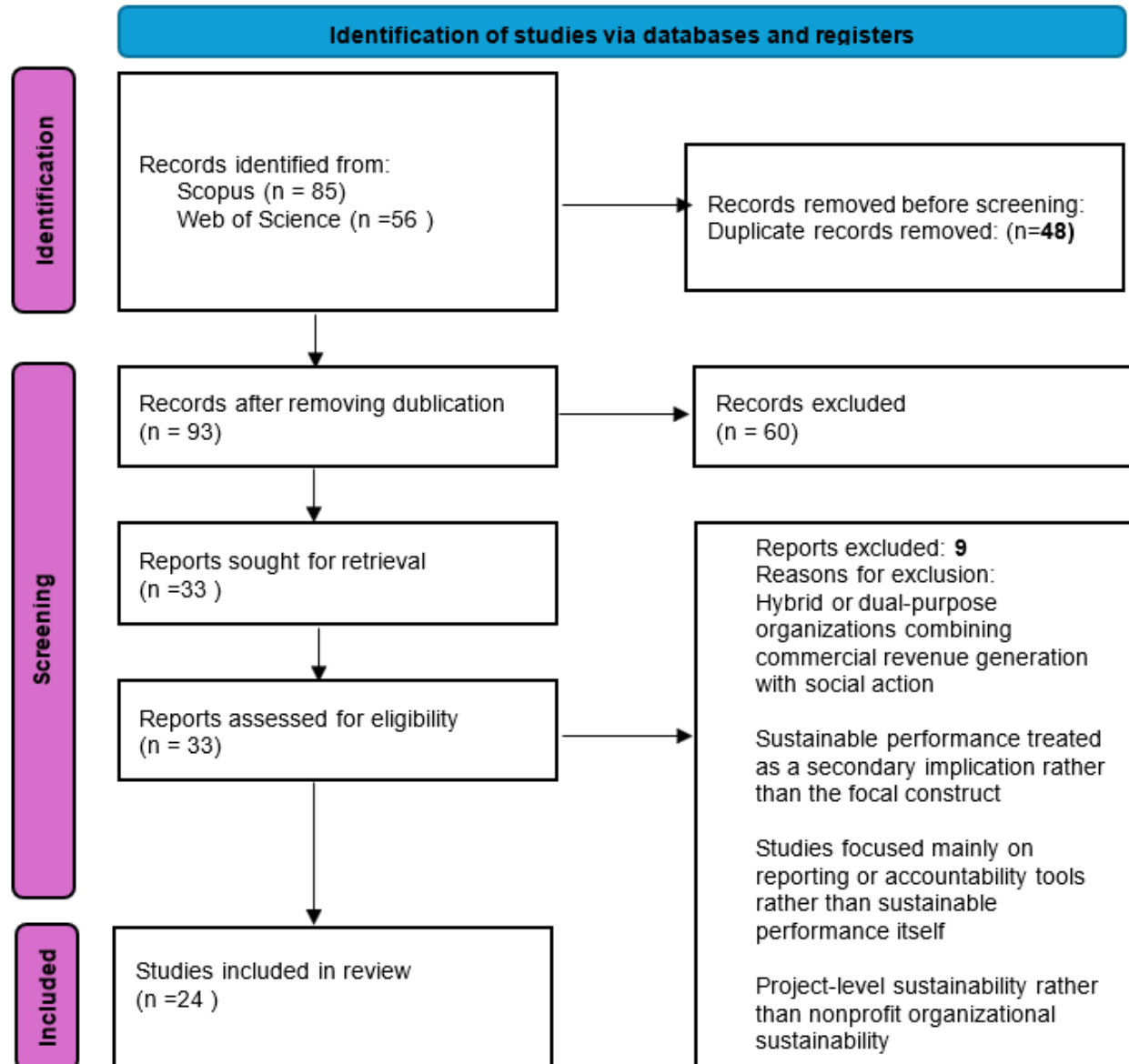


Figure 1.
PRISMA flow diagram.
Source: Page, et al. [25].

2.3. Eligibility and Inclusion

A total of 33 articles advanced to the full-text screening stage and were reviewed iteratively to assess their conceptual and thematic alignment with the review objective. Following this evaluation, 24 articles were retained for final analysis because they addressed SPNPOs as the central phenomenon of inquiry. Articles were excluded when they did not align with this focus, particularly when they (1) examined dual-purpose or hybrid organizations that combined commercial revenue generation with social action, (2) treated sustainable performance as a secondary implication rather than the focal construct, (3) emphasized the development of reporting or accountability tools rather than sustainable performance itself, or (4) addressed project-level sustainability rather than nonprofit organizational

sustainability. These exclusions helped ensure that the final sample remained conceptually coherent, analytically focused, and directly relevant to the aims of the review.

2.4. Data Coding and Synthesis

After eligibility was confirmed, each article was coded for bibliographic information, theoretical lens, country and sectoral context, focal constructs, methodology, analytical technique, and key findings. Coding followed the TCCM framework deductively, while subthemes within each dimension were refined inductively as recurring patterns emerged across the reviewed studies. This procedure allowed the review to retain a structured analytical logic while remaining sensitive to differences in terminology, context, and methodological design.

3. Results and Analysis

3.1. Publication Trend

The 24 reviewed articles were published between 2006 and 2026, indicating that research on sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations has developed gradually rather than as a long-established, consolidated stream. Early contributions were relatively sparse, with only isolated studies appearing before 2010. As shown in Figure 2, publication activity increased modestly between 2010 and 2016, when studies began to examine nonprofit sustainability through financial viability, governance, collaboration, accountability, and mission-related tensions. A more visible expansion occurred after 2020, with recent studies paying greater attention to crisis conditions, dynamic capabilities, social value creation, domestic resource mobilization, environmental shocks, and technology-enabled organizational performance. This pattern suggests that the SPNPO literature remains emerging and unevenly developed, with publication growth concentrated in recent years and limited cumulative theoretical consolidation.

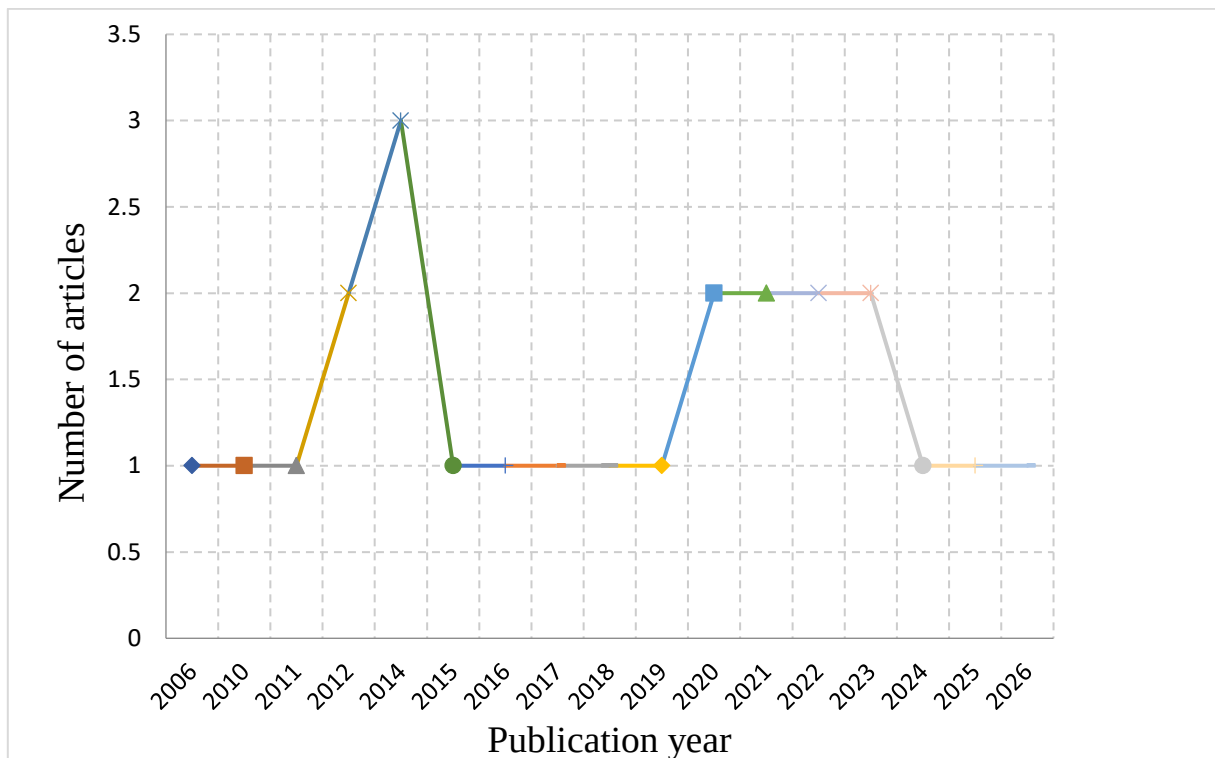


Figure 2.
Publication trend of reviewed studies.

4. TCCM Framework Analysis

In this section, the final sample is systematically coded and analyzed using the TCCM framework, which organizes the review evidence across four dimensions: Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methodology. This analytical structure enables a rigorous synthesis of the field's theoretical foundations, empirical settings, core constructs, and methodological approaches.

4.1. Theory (T)

Within the TCCM framework, the Theory dimension examines the theoretical foundations guiding prior research and clarifies how existing studies explain the phenomenon under review [28]. Accordingly, this section synthesizes the theoretical and conceptual lenses used to conceptualize sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations while distinguishing between theory-based perspectives and broader intellectual lenses. This distinction is necessary because theories, frameworks, models, and paradigms differ in explanatory function and should not be conflated [36, 37].

Table 2 is limited to formal theories and well-established theoretical perspectives that meet three criteria: (1) the presence of clearly defined constructs, (2) an articulated explanatory logic linking constructs to sustainability or performance, and (3) a strong grounding in canonical sources.

Table 2.

Formal theories used in the reviewed studies.

Theoretical lens	Explanatory logic	Canonical source	Reviewed study/studies
Resource-Based View (RBV)	Organizational sustainability depends on valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable resources that enable organizations to sustain performance over time.	Wernerfelt [38] and Barney [39]	Choi, et al. [40]
Social Resource-Based View (SRBV)	Extends the RBV by emphasizing social resources, social capabilities, and mission-driven value creation in nonprofit contexts.	Tate and Bals [41]	
Dynamic Capabilities Theory	Organizations sustain performance in changing environments by sensing opportunities and threats, seizing opportunities, and reconfiguring resources and routines.	Teece, et al. [42]	Shaya, et al. [43]
Organizational Ambidexterity Theory	Sustainable performance depends on balancing exploration of new opportunities with exploitation of existing capabilities.	March [44]	Shaya, et al. [43]
Resource-Advantage Theory	Competition is a dynamic process in which superior resources generate comparative advantages that can produce superior performance.	Hunt and Morgan [45]	McDonald, et al. [19]
Natural-Resource-Based View (NRBV)	Environmental capabilities, including pollution prevention, product stewardship, and sustainable development, can become strategic sources of advantage.	Hart [46]	Wright and Reames [5]
Psychological Contract Theory	Breaches of perceived reciprocal obligations between employees and organizations affect motivation, trust, commitment, and organizational sustainability.	Rousseau [47]	Dogar [48]
Institutional Theory	Organizations are shaped by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pressures and often seek legitimacy through conformity to institutional expectations.	DiMaggio and Powell [49] and Meyer and Rowan [50]	MacKenzie, et al. [51]
Organizational Learning Theory	Organizations improve sustainability by creating, retaining, transferring, and applying knowledge to enhance adaptation and performance.	Levitt and March [52]	Alnamrouti, et al. [53] and Ismael and Emeagwali [54]
Cournot Theory of Oligopolistic Competition	Competing organizations operate under strategic interdependence, where each actor's fundraising or market behavior affects the outcomes of others.	Maskin and Tirole [55]	Omura and Forster [2]

These theories and theory-based perspectives are typically used for explanation, prediction, and hypothesis development, consistent with the definition of theory as a system of interrelated constructs and propositions that explain and predict phenomena [37].

In contrast, Table 3 captures conceptual frameworks, philosophical paradigms, managerial perspectives, and critical or alternative organizing lenses that do not fully meet the criteria for formal theory but provide interpretive, structural, or normative lenses for understanding SPNPOs. Conceptual frameworks tend to organize variables and relationships without necessarily specifying fully developed causal propositions [56]. By separating these elements, the review avoids overstating the theoretical maturity of the field and provides a more nuanced account of its intellectual structure.

Table 3.
Conceptual, critical, and alternative lenses.

Lens/framework/approach	Concise description	Canonical or best-available source	Reviewed study/studies
Funding ecosystem perspective	Nonprofit sustainability is shaped by interactions among donors, governments, markets, communities, and civil society actors within broader funding systems.	Edwards [57]	Kumi [58]
Intergenerational sustainability framework	Organizational sustainability combines institutional survival with long-term mission fulfillment, stewardship, resilience, and institutional distinctiveness.	Moldavanova [59]	Moldavanova [59]
Nonprofit management perspective	Nonprofit organizations are analyzed through sector-specific practices of management, accountability, leadership, governance, and operational effectiveness.	Anheier [60]	Weerawardena, et al. [1]
Feminist geographic perspective	Gendered power relations, solidarity practices, spatial inequalities, and community dynamics shape organizational sustainability and microfinance outcomes.	Bee [61]	Bee [61]
Critique of neoliberalism/marketization	Market-oriented reforms can privilege competition, efficiency, financial discipline, and calculative rationality over solidarity, dignity, and mission.	Harvey [62] and Jensen [63]	Bee [61] and Jensen [63]
Personalist organizing model	Organizing is grounded in dignity, relational ethics, solidarity, community embeddedness, and mission-first care rather than managerial instrumentalism.	Jensen [63]	Jensen [63]
Anarchist organizing principles	Organizing emphasizes horizontal coordination, voluntary association, mutual aid, decentralized authority, and resistance to hierarchical or market-oriented control.	Jensen [63]	Jensen [63]

4.2. Theoretical Foundations

The reviewed studies show that SPNPOs have been explained mainly through resource-based, capability-based, learning, institutional, psychological, and competition-based theories. Resource-based perspectives, including the RBV, SRBV, NRBV, and Resource-Advantage Theory, conceptualize sustainability as dependent on the acquisition, configuration, and deployment of valuable resources and capabilities. Capability-oriented theories, particularly Dynamic Capabilities Theory and Organizational Ambidexterity Theory, emphasize adaptation, reconfiguration, and the balance between exploration and exploitation in uncertain environments. Learning theories explain sustainability through knowledge creation, transfer, and interorganizational learning, while Institutional Theory highlights the roles of legitimacy, regulatory pressures, and institutional expectations. Psychological Contract Theory adds an internal organizational perspective by linking employee perceptions, trust, and motivation to sustainability outcomes. Finally, Cournot Theory frames nonprofit sustainability in relation to competitive interdependence, particularly in fundraising markets.

Together, these theories indicate that SPNPOs cannot be explained through a single dominant theory. Instead, the field is theoretically pluralistic, with different studies emphasizing internal

resources, adaptive capacity, organizational learning, legitimacy, employee relations, and competition as distinct but related explanations for sustainable performance.

4.3. Conceptual, Systems, and Critical Lenses

Table 3 presents conceptual frameworks, managerial perspectives, critical perspectives, and alternative organizing lenses that contribute to understanding SPNPOs but do not fully meet the criteria for formal theory. These lenses are important because they broaden interpretations of nonprofit sustainability beyond conventional managerial and performance-oriented explanations.

The funding ecosystem perspective situates nonprofit sustainability within wider interactions among donors, governments, markets, communities, and civil society actors. The intergenerational sustainability framework extends the discussion beyond immediate organizational survival to include long-term stewardship, resilience, institutional distinctiveness, and mission fulfillment. The nonprofit management perspective emphasizes leadership, accountability, governance, and operational effectiveness as sector-specific concerns. Critical and alternative perspectives further challenge dominant market-oriented understandings of sustainability by foregrounding gendered power relations, solidarity, dignity, community embeddedness, horizontal organizing, and resistance to excessive managerial or neoliberal logics.

These lenses show that SPNPOs are not only a question of resources, capabilities, or strategy. They are also shaped by values, power relations, community relations, institutional ethics, and competing assumptions about what nonprofit sustainability should mean.

4.4. Theoretical Integration

Taken together, the theoretical and conceptual landscape reveals three unresolved tensions that can guide future theoretical development. These tensions are summarized as integrative propositions in Table 4.

Table 4.
Integrative theoretical tensions in the SPNPOs literature.

Tension	Integrative proposition
The mission-market tension	Resource-based and mission-based logics of sustainability are structurally interdependent but often remain in tension: strategies that enhance financial sustainability may generate institutional isomorphism and mission drift, while strategies that preserve mission integrity may weaken financial resilience. Future research should identify mechanisms through which mission fulfillment and financial viability can be aligned.
Internal capability versus external embeddedness	Internal capability perspectives explain sustainability as generated through resources, learning, governance, and adaptive capacity. Relational and institutional perspectives explain sustainability as co-produced through legitimacy, partnerships, and external support. Future research should specify the conditions under which each logic dominates and how the two can be integrated.
The boundary conditions problem	Many theories used in this literature were developed in private-sector and Western institutional contexts. Resource-based, governance, and dynamic-capability assumptions may not fully hold in aid-dependent, state-controlled, or resource-constrained nonprofit environments. Future theorizing should adapt existing theories to nonprofit boundary conditions or develop sector-specific frameworks.

4.5. Context (C)

The Context dimension of the TCCM framework examines the environmental, institutional, and situational conditions under which research is conducted [28]. In this review, the Context dimension is used to identify where, in which sectors, and under what environmental conditions SPNPOs have been studied.

4.5.1. Geographical Context

The literature shows that SPNPOs have been examined across a range of national settings. As shown in Figure 3, contextual coverage is concentrated in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Ghana, and South Africa, while Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East appear in proportionally fewer studies.

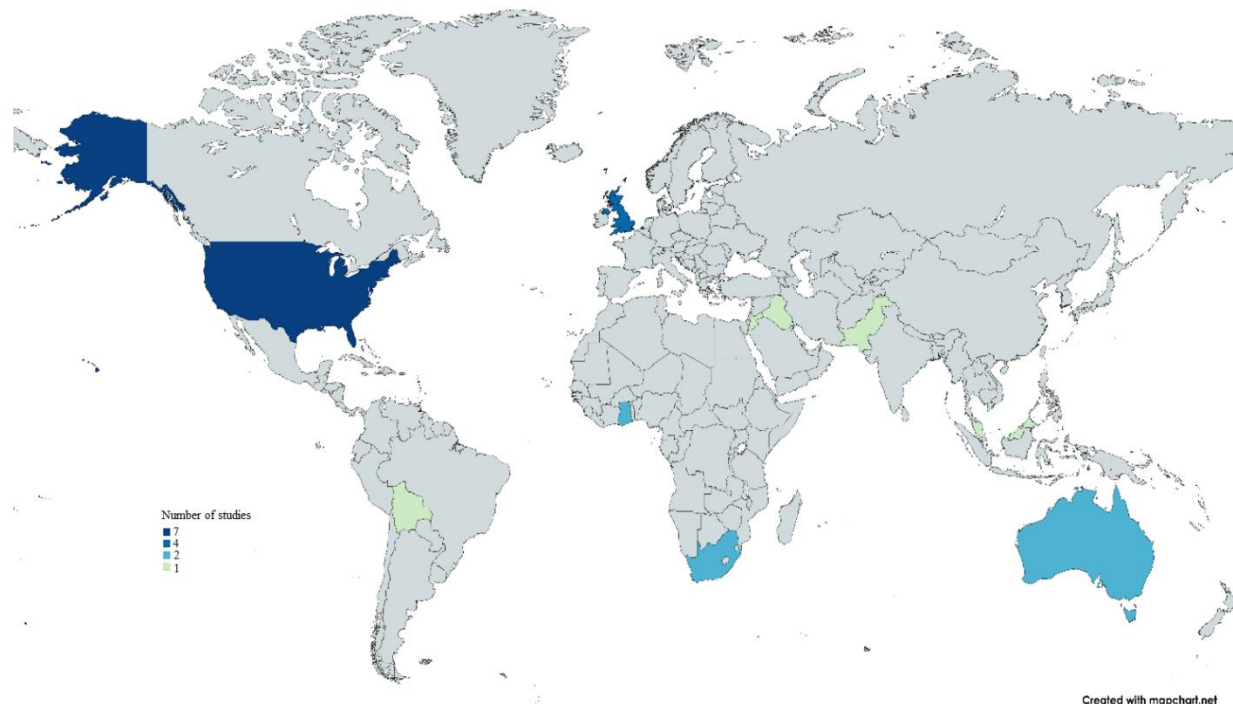


Figure 3.
Geographic distribution of reviewed studies.

In developed-country contexts, studies mainly emphasize resource mobilization, competitive funding dynamics, governance and accountability, and market-oriented pressures. For example, Jensen [63] highlights the risk of mission displacement under neoliberal and commercial logics; Hayden [64] shows how weak board composition and limited mission allegiance threaten organizational viability; Benson, et al. [65] demonstrate that environmental conditions can reshape donations and volunteering; Weerawardena, et al. [1] and Omura and Forster [2] show how competition for resources pushes nonprofits toward entrepreneurial strategies while intensifying zero-sum funding dynamics.

In developing and crisis-affected contexts, studies mainly emphasize donor dependency, funding volatility, institutional and legal fragility, governance constraints, and limited organizational capacity. For example, Okorley and Nkrumah [18] show that local NGO sustainability in Ghana is constrained by capacity gaps, external funding dependence, and political influence; Singh and Mthuli [66] demonstrate that international NPOs operating in volatile environments must navigate funding arrangements, partnerships, North-South power dynamics, and political neutrality; Shaya, et al. [43] show that NPO sustainability in Lebanon depends on dynamic capabilities and organizational ambidexterity under crisis conditions; Ismael and Emeagwali [54] reveal that legal and regulatory frameworks shape how inter-organizational learning contributes to sustainable performance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq; and Bee [61] shows that microfinance practices in Bolivia may create tensions between financial sustainability and social solidarity.

4.5.2. Sectoral Context

Sectoral context provides an equally important layer of analytical differentiation. Rather than treating organizational types as an undifferentiated list, the reviewed studies can be grouped into sectoral categories defined by distinct mission domains, as shown in Table 5. This classification illustrates that sustainability pressures differ according to mission domain, service model, and stakeholder environment.

For example, De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67] show that health and palliative care organizations face sustainability pressures linked to professional care costs, rising service demand, revenue diversification, and staff commitment, while Hayden [64] demonstrates that governance vulnerability at the board level can threaten the viability of nonprofit health organizations. In the education and youth-development sector, Dogar [48] highlights how leadership conflict and breaches of the psychological contract can weaken workforce motivation and organizational sustainability, whereas Choi, et al. [40] show that early-stage resource configurations are central to the sustainability of sport-for-development organizations.

Table 5.

Contexts studied across the reviewed literature.

Context category	Geographic setting	Sector group	Main contextual insight	Reviewed studies
Developed country	United States	Youth and sport development; social services and housing; health and palliative care; cross-sector NPOs	Sustainable performance is shaped by resource configuration, governance quality, accountability, market pressures, environmental shocks, and long-term stewardship.	Choi, et al. [40]; Jensen [63]; Wright and Reames [5]; Hayden [64]; Benson, et al. [65]; Moldavanova [59] and Jones and Mucha [68]
Developed country	United Kingdom	Civil society and migration support; cross-sector partnerships	Sustainable performance is influenced by governance capacity, economic downturn pressures, resource competition, political influence, and partnership portfolio development.	Chapman [20]; MacKenzie, et al. [51] and Al-Tabbaa, et al. [69]
Developed country	Australia	Social services and welfare; cross-sector NPOs	Sustainable performance is shaped by competitive funding environments, donation competition, and entrepreneurial strategies for balancing mission and financial viability.	Weerawardena, et al. [1] and Omura and Forster [2]
Developing country	Ghana; South Africa	International development and humanitarian relief; health	Sustainable performance is constrained by donor dependency, weak domestic resource mobilization, capacity limitations, funding volatility, leadership demands, and crisis pressures.	Okorley and Nkrumah [18]; Kumi [58]; De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67] and Singh and Mthuli [66]
Crisis-affected countries	Jordan; Lebanon; Kurdistan Region of Iraq	International development and humanitarian relief	Sustainable performance depends on organizational learning, adaptive capabilities, strategic human resources, legal frameworks, institutional fragility, and crisis responsiveness.	Alnamrouti, et al. [53]; Shaya, et al. [43] and Ismael and Emeagwali [54]
Developing country	Pakistan; Malaysia	Education and youth development; cross-sector NPOs	Sustainable performance is influenced by internal organizational relationships, workforce motivation, leadership conflict, social entrepreneurial	Dogar [48]

Context category	Geographic setting	Sector group	Main contextual insight	Reviewed studies
			orientation, and social value creation.	
Developing country	Bolivia	Social finance	Sustainable performance reflects a paradox in which financial mechanisms may undermine the social solidarity needed for community-based impact.	Bee [61]

In social service organizations, Jensen [63] illustrates the tension between market-oriented sustainability and mission-centered organizing, while Wright and Reames [5] and Weerawardena, et al. [1] show that community engagement, human resource capacity, collaboration, government funding, and entrepreneurial strategies shape sustainability outcomes. In international development and humanitarian organizations, Kumi [58] shows that donor withdrawal pushes national NGOs toward domestic resource mobilization, although these strategies remain constrained by weak philanthropic infrastructure and organizational capacity. Similarly, Alnamrouti, et al. [53] and Shaya, et al. [43] show that organizational learning, strategic human resources, artificial intelligence, dynamic capabilities, and organizational ambidexterity support NGO sustainability under uncertain and crisis-affected conditions. In civil society and migration-support organizations, MacKenzie, et al. [51] show that sustainability pressures emerge from competition for resources and political influence, creating tensions between institutional survival and substantive service provision.

4.6. Characteristics (C)

The Characteristics dimension of the TCCM framework synthesizes the key constructs, mechanisms, and relationships used in the reviewed studies [28]. In this review, these characteristics are organized as interconnected organizational, relational, strategic, and contextual features and grouped into six clusters, as shown in Table 6.

4.7. Resource and Financial Sustainability Characteristics

A dominant group of studies examined sustainability through resource availability, financial viability, and resource mobilization. These studies generally conceptualized sustainable performance as dependent on the ability of nonprofit organizations to secure, manage, diversify, and renew financial and non-financial resources. Choi, et al. [40], for example, examined initial resource levels and rates of change in financial, human, physical/process, and strategic resources, showing that resource configurations during early organizational life stages are central to organizational sustainability and growth. Similarly, Kumi [58] focused on declining external donor funding, changing donor priorities, and the need for domestic resource mobilization, identifying volunteer support, individual donations, commercial activities, corporate philanthropy, and government funding as central funding ecosystem elements. Omura and Forster [2] examined fundraising expenditure, volunteers, organizational size, and age within a donation-competition model, showing that fundraising can increase donations for one organization while negatively affecting donations to similar organizations. Benson, et al. [65] extended this resource-focused line by examining how hazardous air quality affects donations and volunteering, showing that poor environmental conditions may reduce monetary donations while increasing volunteering.

This stream indicates that financial sustainability is not reducible to funding volume alone. Rather, the literature studies funding as a dynamic and competitive process shaped by resource diversification, donor behavior, volunteer engagement, environmental shocks, and institutional funding conditions. This is also evident in Weerawardena, et al. [1], who examined how competitive environments push nonprofits to adopt sustainability-oriented strategies involving revenue enhancement, cost reduction, operational efficiency, and mission adaptation. McDonald, et al. [19] further framed this issue through

the double-bottom-line tension between fiscal performance and social need, using a sustainability-based typology to diagnose organizational vulnerability and guide strategies for balancing money and mission.

4.8. Organizational and Managerial Capability Characteristics

A second cluster of studies focused on internal organizational capabilities, especially leadership, governance, human resources, strategic adaptability, learning, and operational management. Okorley and Nkrumah [18] examined leadership, funding, program development, management, and material resources, identifying supportive leadership, effective management, needs-based programming, and accountability as major internal factors influencing local NGO sustainability. De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67] similarly identified a set of organizational drivers of sustainability in South African hospices, including transparent communication, visionary leadership, strategic orientation, improved service quality, strong corporate culture, diversified revenue, and committed staff. Chapman [20] challenged the tendency to use income as a proxy for success, instead emphasizing governance-related characteristics such as organizational foresight, enterprise, capability, and impact. Hayden [64] also highlighted governance characteristics, particularly board composition and board allegiance, showing that boards dominated by affiliated outsiders or lacking commitment to the mission and financial viability can undermine nonprofit sustainability.

Other studies examined more advanced capability configurations. Shaya, et al. [43] studied sensing, seizing, and reconfiguring capabilities and showed that organizational ambidexterity mediates the relationship between dynamic capabilities and sustainability performance in crisis-affected NGOs. Alnamrouti, et al. [53] examined organizational learning, artificial intelligence, strategic human resource management, and corporate social responsibility, indicating that sustainable organizational performance is shaped by the interaction of learning, technological capability, and strategic human resource practices. Wright and Reames [5] added community engagement, human resource capacity, county/regional government collaboration, government funding, and revenue diversification as organizational and managerial predictors of community sustainability performance. Collectively, these studies suggest that the literature has moved from examining isolated internal factors toward studying bundles of organizational capabilities that enable nonprofits to adapt, govern, learn, and perform sustainably.

4.9. Relational, Collaborative, and Stakeholder Characteristics

A third cluster of studies examined sustainability through relationships, partnerships, stakeholder alignment, and inter-organizational collaboration. Al-Tabbaa, et al. [70] conceptualized nonprofit-business collaboration through a strategy framework involving context, content, and process characteristics, including stakeholder expectations, nonprofit competition, cultural barriers, collaboration level, strategic positioning, power imbalances, communication channels, and transaction costs. Al-Tabbaa, et al. [69] later examined nonprofit-business partnership portfolio size, identifying economic value proposition, social value proposition, flexibility, environmental mission, trust, NPO size, and NPO age as relevant characteristics shaping collaborative effectiveness.

Ismael and Emeagwali [54] examined inter-organizational learning, value creation, the legal framework, and sustainable performance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Their study is especially important because it treated value creation as a partial mediator between inter-organizational learning and sustainable performance, while the legal framework moderated the relationship between learning and value creation. This shows that collaborative learning is not automatically converted into sustainability; rather, it is conditioned by legal and regulatory environments, particularly in autonomous regions characterized by institutional duality. MacKenzie, et al. [51] also examined networked sustainability from the perspective of migrant-support organizations, showing that competition for resources and political influence can create tensions between the institutional goals of organizational sustainability and the substantive goals of service provision. These studies collectively

suggest that nonprofit sustainability is relationally produced, but collaboration is shaped by trust, power, legal constraints, stakeholder expectations, and the risk of mission displacement.

4.10. Mission, Social Value, and Accountability Characteristics

A fourth group of studies examined characteristics related to mission fulfillment, social value creation, accountability, impact, and sustainability reporting. One study treated social entrepreneurial orientation as a higher-order construct composed of innovativeness, proactiveness, risk management, effectual orientation, and social mission orientation, showing that this orientation positively influences social value creation during crisis conditions. Jones and Mucha [68] emphasized sustainability assessment and reporting, arguing that nonprofits should assess and report environmental, cultural, economic, and social sustainability performance because of their responsibility to serve the public good. Moldavanova [59] expanded the temporal dimension of sustainability by distinguishing between immediate institutional survival and intergenerational sustainability, emphasizing institutional resilience and distinctiveness as characteristics of long-term mission continuity.

This cluster shows that sustainable performance is not only studied as financial endurance or operational continuity but also as a multidimensional social achievement. Across the literature, social value, accountability, mission preservation, public-good responsibility, and intergenerational continuity emerge as central characteristics of nonprofit sustainability. However, these characteristics are often measured or conceptualized differently across studies, suggesting the need for greater conceptual clarity in distinguishing organizational survival, financial sustainability, social value creation, and sustainable performance.

4.11. External Antecedent and Contextual Shock Characteristics

Several studies operationalize contextual pressure through donor withdrawal, crisis exposure, weak philanthropic ecosystems, legal ambiguity, environmental shocks, political instability, and pandemic-related disruption. Kumi [58] focused on aid reduction and donor withdrawal in Ghana, showing how changing funding modalities and the lack of an enabling domestic philanthropic environment constrain the potential for financial sustainability through local resource mobilization. Shaya, et al. [43] examined sustainability in Lebanon as a crisis-affected context, where NGOs require strategic adaptability to sustain their activities amid socioeconomic and political instability. De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67] studied hospices in South Africa during the COVID-19 era and identified lockdowns and the proliferation of NPOs as impediments to sustainability. Benson, et al. [65] introduced air pollution as an environmental factor affecting nonprofit donations and volunteering, thereby showing that environmental conditions can influence civic engagement and resource availability.

This group of studies indicates that the characteristics examined in nonprofit sustainability research increasingly include not only organizational variables but also external shocks and institutional conditions. Legal frameworks, donor withdrawal, economic downturns, pandemics, environmental hazards, and political instability operate as antecedent conditions that shape nonprofit decisions and outcomes. This reinforces the need to treat sustainable performance as context-sensitive rather than universally determined.

4.12. Critical, Paradoxical, and Alternative Organizing Characteristics

A final cluster of studies examined the tensions and paradoxes embedded in nonprofit sustainability. Dogar [48] examined breaches of the psychological contract and conflicts of interest between top leadership and the workforce, showing how exclusion from decision-making and leadership-worker conflict can reduce employee commitment, motivation, and organizational performance. Bee [61] examined microfinance in Bolivia and showed that the use of social collateral and solidarity lending can produce an irreconcilable paradox, in which mechanisms intended to create solidarity may also intensify pressure, exclusion, and humiliation when members experience financial difficulty. Jensen [63] challenged market-oriented sustainability assumptions by examining an anarchist-run homeless shelter

that sustained operations through personal connections, voluntary labor, community embeddedness, and a personalist organizing model rather than business-like managerial practices.

This body of work shows that nonprofit sustainability is not always studied as a purely positive managerial achievement. Some studies examine sustainability as a contested and value-laden process in which financial discipline, marketization, professionalization, and efficiency may conflict with solidarity, dignity, participatory governance, and social mission. This critical cluster is particularly important because it prevents the review from treating sustainability as a neutral construct and instead highlights the tensions between sustaining organizations and sustaining missions.

Table 6.

Main characteristics studied across the reviewed literature.

Characteristic cluster	Core constructs/variables studied	Representative papers	Key synthesis insight
Resource and financial sustainability	Initial resource levels, resource changes, funding diversification, donations, fundraising expenditure, volunteers, donor competition, domestic resource mobilization, revenue enhancement, cost reduction	Choi, et al. [40]; Kumi [58]; Omura and Forster [2]; Benson, et al. [65]; Weerawardena, et al. [1] and McDonald, et al. [19]	Sustainability is frequently studied as the ability to secure and renew financial and non-financial resources, while the literature increasingly recognizes competition, donor behavior, and environmental shocks as components of the resource system.
Organizational and managerial capabilities	Leadership, governance, management, human resource capacity, strategic orientation, service quality, organizational culture, communication, learning, SHRM, AI, CSR, sensing, seizing, reconfiguring, and ambidexterity	Okorley and Nkrumah [18]; De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67]; Chapman [20]; Hayden [64]; Alnamrouti, et al. [53]; Shaya, et al. [43] and Wright and Reames [5]	The literature increasingly examines sustainability through capability bundles rather than isolated factors, emphasizing leadership, learning, governance, and adaptability.
Relational and stakeholder characteristics	Stakeholder expectations, partnerships, trust, business collaboration, economic rent, social value proposition, communication channels, power imbalances, inter-organizational learning, legal framework, value creation	Al-Tabbaa, et al. [70]; Al-Tabbaa, et al. [69]; Ismael and Emeagwali [54] and MacKenzie, et al. [51]	Sustainability is co-produced through relationships, but collaboration is shaped by power, legal conditions, trust, strategic positioning, and tension between institutional and substantive goals.
Mission, social value, and accountability	Social value, social entrepreneurial orientation, mission fulfillment, public-good accountability, sustainability reporting, institutional resilience, institutional distinctiveness, intergenerational sustainability	Jones and Mucha [68]; Moldavanova [59]; McDonald, et al. [19] and Weerawardena, et al. [1]	Sustainable performance concerns not only survival or financial viability but also mission continuity, public accountability, social value creation, and long-term institutional stewardship.
Institutional, environmental, and crisis conditions	Donor withdrawal, legal and regulatory frameworks, institutional duality, COVID-19, economic downturn, air pollution, political instability, resource scarcity, and competition for influence	Kumi [58]; Ismael and Emeagwali [54]; De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67]; Benson, et al. [65]; Shaya, et al. [43]; Chapman [20] and MacKenzie, et al. [51]	Contextual pressures are increasingly treated as central characteristics shaping sustainability, demonstrating that nonprofit performance is context-dependent and crisis-sensitive.
Critical and alternative organizing characteristics	Psychological contract breach, conflict of interest, exclusion from decision-making, solidarity paradox, social collateral, neoliberal marketization, anarchist organizing, personalist model, mission-first logic	Dogar [48]; Bee [61] and Jensen [63]	Critical studies reveal that sustainability can generate tensions when financial discipline or managerialism undermines solidarity, participation, dignity, and mission.

Overall, the characteristics examined in the reviewed literature reveal that sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations is multidimensional, relational, and context-dependent. These characteristics also indicate that the field has identified a wide range of antecedents and outcomes but has paid less attention to the decision-making mechanisms through which nonprofit organizations translate pressures into sustainability strategies.

4.13. *Methods (M)*

The Methodology dimension of the TCCM framework examines how sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations has been investigated across the reviewed studies. In this review, methodology is treated as an indicator of how the field has generated evidence, captured organizational complexity, and examined SPNPOs.

As shown in Table 7, the literature is predominantly empirical, while fewer studies are conceptual. Qualitative studies are mainly used to examine complex organizational processes, governance practices, stakeholder relationships, and context-specific sustainability challenges. For example, Dogar [48] uses a case-based qualitative approach to examine psychological contract breach and workforce motivation, Bee [61] applies qualitative inquiry to reveal the paradoxes of solidarity lending, De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67] use interviews to identify sustainability propellers in South African hospices, and Singh and Mthuli [66] adopt a qualitative system dynamics approach to capture the interaction of multiple sustainability factors. By contrast, quantitative studies generally examine relationships between organizational capabilities, resource conditions, stakeholder engagement, and sustainable performance outcomes.

The reviewed literature also shows a strong reliance on cross-sectional research designs. Studies such as Dogar [48], De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67], Wright and Reames [5], and Ismael and Emeagwali [54] provide valuable evidence on factors associated with sustainable performance at specific points in time. However, fewer studies adopt longitudinal approaches, despite the importance of time in understanding sustainability trajectories. Choi, et al. [40] examine resource development during the early stages of organizational life, Omura and Forster [2] analyze donation competition over time, Chapman [20] uses longitudinal evidence to examine governance and sustainable futures, and MacKenzie, et al. [51] explore the evolution of support networks and organizational tensions. This indicates that the field remains limited in its ability to capture how nonprofit sustainable performance develops, changes, or weakens over time.

In terms of analytical techniques, qualitative studies commonly rely on thematic, interpretive, content-based, or system-oriented analysis, as seen in Bee [61], De Wet and Eresia-Eke [67], Dogar [48], and Singh and Mthuli [66].

Table 7.
Overview of research methodologies applied across the reviewed literature.

Criteria	Category	Number of studies
Type of paper	Empirical	21
	Conceptual	3
Research design	Quantitative	9
	Qualitative	10
	Mixed methods	2
Time frame of data collection	Cross-sectional	15
	Longitudinal	6
Data analysis techniques	Thematic/content/cross-case qualitative analysis	5
	Other qualitative interpretive analysis	4
	Qualitative analysis not clearly specified	1
	PLS-SEM / variance-based SEM	3
	Regression models	3
	Advanced econometric techniques	2
	Latent profile and multilevel growth modeling	1
	Mixed-method descriptive and coding analysis	1
	Scoring/framework-based mixed evaluation	1

Quantitative studies employ a wider range of statistical methods, including regression models, structural equation modeling, and advanced econometric techniques. For example, Wright and Reames [5] use regression analysis; Alnamrouti, et al. [53] and Shaya, et al. [43] use PLS-SEM; Al-Tabbaa, et al. [69] use regression-based analysis of nonprofit-business partnership portfolios; and Benson, et al. [65] employ advanced econometric techniques to examine the effect of air pollution on donations and volunteering. Choi, et al. [40] further extends the methodological range by using latent profile analysis and multilevel growth modeling.

Overall, the methodological profile of the literature shows that research on SPNPOs is empirically rich but remains dominated by cross-sectional and methodologically fragmented designs. Future research would benefit from more longitudinal, comparative, mixed-methods, and multilevel designs capable of explaining how nonprofit organizations develop and sustain performance over time.

5. Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that sustainable performance in nonprofit organizations is inherently complex, reflecting not only the configuration of internal resources and capabilities but also the organization's capacity to navigate institutional pressures, sustain stakeholder relationships, and reconcile competing logics of mission, accountability, and financial viability. In this sense, sustainability emerges less as a state to be achieved than as an ongoing organizational accomplishment, shaped by adaptation, negotiation, and strategic interpretation under conditions of uncertainty.

At the theoretical level, the review highlights a field that is rich in perspectives but limited in cumulative integration. Resource-based, strategic, governance, stakeholder, and institutional theories provide important but partial explanations, often applied in isolation rather than as complementary lenses. At the same time, conceptual frameworks, systems approaches, and critical perspectives expand the interpretive scope of the field but remain weakly connected to theory development. This theoretical plurality, while valuable, has constrained the emergence of a coherent explanatory framework. The present study contributes by demonstrating how these perspectives can be more productively aligned through the TCCM analytical structure, clarifying the theories, contexts, characteristics, and methods through which sustainability has been studied and revealing where integration remains incomplete. Such an approach provides a foundation for more cumulative and integrative theory building in nonprofit management research.

From a contextual and empirical standpoint, the findings underscore that nonprofit sustainability is deeply contingent on geographical, institutional, and sectoral conditions. The dominance of studies from

developed contexts, coupled with the relative underrepresentation of the Global South and crisis-affected environments, limits the generalizability of existing knowledge. Moreover, the strong reliance on cross-sectional empirical designs constrains the ability to capture temporal dynamics, path dependencies, and feedback loops that are central to understanding sustainability processes. Addressing these limitations requires a shift toward longitudinal, comparative, and multilevel research designs that can better account for the evolving and context-sensitive nature of nonprofit performance.

Importantly, the review also surfaces the normative and paradoxical dimensions of sustainability in nonprofit organizations. The persistent tension between mission and money, reinforced by processes of marketization and institutional pressure, suggests that sustainability strategies may simultaneously enable organizational survival while risking the undermining of core values, social mission, and relational integrity. Accordingly, sustainable performance should not be reduced to financial resilience or operational continuity alone but must be understood in relation to broader outcomes, such as social value creation, accountability, legitimacy, and intergenerational mission preservation. This perspective calls for greater dialogue between managerial and critical traditions to more fully capture the ethical, social, and political dimensions of nonprofit sustainability.

Practically, the findings suggest that achieving sustainable performance requires nonprofit leaders to move beyond single-dimensional strategies and instead develop integrated approaches that combine resource mobilization, capability development, governance effectiveness, and stakeholder engagement, while maintaining alignment with the mission and long-term social impact. The emphasis on decision-making processes further highlights the importance of strategic choice under conditions of uncertainty, including how organizations prioritize competing demands, select among alternative sustainability pathways, and manage trade-offs between efficiency, legitimacy, and mission integrity.

Transparency:

The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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