

Local Governments Explore the Path System of High Quality Development of Social Organizations—A Grounded Theory Analysis Based on Local Government Policy Documents

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Abstract: In today's context, the high-quality development of social organizations plays a crucial role in social governance and public service provision. This paper focuses on the policy texts of local governments in fostering the development of social organizations, and employs the grounded theory approach to analyze the pathways of local governments in exploring the high-quality development of social organizations by coding and analyzing 36 local policy documents with the NVivo12 software. The study constructed a five-dimensional progressive model of "Foundation—Capacity—Power—Collaborate—Value", which starts from the Institutional Safeguard System, Organizational Development Foundation Capacity Building, Performance-Driven Incentives, Strategic Synergy Value Network, and Socialized Governance Participatory Mechanisms. Based on these elements, the study comprehensively explains the internal logic and policy path of the high-quality development of social organizations. This study aims to provide a theoretical basis and practical guidance for promoting social organizations to better participate in social governance and achieve sustainable development, and at the same time, reveals the limitations in the research process and illuminates the direction for further research.

Keywords: Social organizations; High-quality development; Grounded theory; Local governments; Policy documents

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1. Introduction

As the modernization of social governance advances, the strategic value of social organizations, as the main body of multiple governance, is becoming more and more prominent ^[1-2]. Policies such as China's Opinions on Strengthening the Normative Construction of Social Organizations have made clear the orientation of high-

quality development, and the supporting measures of local governments have covered areas such as registration management and financial support. However, the systematic path research is still insufficient.

Established literature focuses on NGO functions and challenges: Islam reveals that Bangladeshi NGOs promote community development through education and health projects; Becerikli and Koroglutake take Antakya as an example to highlight the coordinating advantages of NGOs in local economic and environmental development^[3-4]. In terms of the role of government, Vander Zaag analyzes the contradiction between funding dependence and independence of NGOs in Canada, while Otsuki summarizes that Brazilian NGOs face the difficulty of coordinating the interests of multiple parties in sustainable development^[5-6]. At the level of theoretical research, Aldashev and Navarra quantitatively analyze the global distribution and functions of NGOs, confirming their efficacy in bridging the gap in public services; Kelly criticizes the traditional evaluation system and proposes that NGOs need an outcome-process evaluation framework; Hakkarainen reveals the cultural conflicts and resource dilemmas of NGO-business cooperation^[7-9].

Existing studies mostly focus on single factors and lack a systematic analysis of the construction of a high-quality development system driven by policies. The text is divided into six parts: research background, problem formulation, research design, model construction, path analysis, and conclusion outlook, aiming to reveal the law of policy-driven social organization development.

2. Objectives

There are three limitations in the current research: first, insufficient excavation of the institutional logic implicit in local government policy texts (e.g., Hudson did not compare the effects of different political environments on NGO advocacy effectiveness); second, weak research on dynamic mechanisms (e.g., Miraftab did not track the adaptive strategies of emerging NGOs^[10-11]. Additionally, Bebbington did not deeply analyze the strategies of practices in transition); and third, the absence of a cross-case systematic framework (e.g., Miraftab did not utilize the method of cross-case study to deeply analyze the development of social organizations)^[11-12]. Based on the above policy background and the current state of theoretical research, this paper raises the following questions:

How is the path system of high-quality development of social organizations constructed under the guidance of local government policies?

What is its internal logic and interrelationship?

3. Analytical perspectives and research design

3.1. Analytical perspective: Policy instrument perspective

This study builds a policy instrument framework for NGO high-quality development. Employing grounded theory, it maps policy spectrums and optimizes application paths, advancing NGO-policy nexus understanding. Huang et al. demonstrate NGOs' role in China's nuclear policy shifts via goal-instrument analysis, so this research method has been proven to be feasible in the study of NGOs' development^[13].

3.2. Research methodology: Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) is a method of refining concepts, categories, and theories through in-depth analysis, avoiding preconceived assumptions and enhancing the explanatory power of research^[14-15]. Nwauche and Flanigan use this method to analyze the barriers to the participation of South African nonprofit organizations (NGOs) in

social development planning and analyze the deep-rooted factors hindering the effective participation of NGOs in policy making through in-depth interviews ^[16]. Ultimately, they find that a shortage of resources, ineffective government-society communication, and weak organizational capacity are the core constraints. Finally, it provides insights for enhancing the effectiveness of NGO policy participation.

3.3. Data collection

Policy texts were retrieved via “local government + social organization + development” keywords from PKULaw, LegalStar, and 31 provincial government or civil affairs portals. After screening irrelevant documents, 36 policies were retained (Table 1).

Table 1. *Partial policy documents*

Number	Policy documents	Year of issuance
1	Notice on Strengthening the Construction of Social Organizations and Promoting High-Quality Development in Zibo City	2023
2	Notice on Printing and Distributing the Implementation Measures for Social Organization Development Support Projects in Shandong Province (Trial)	2020
3	Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Party Building and Promoting High-Quality Development of Social Organizations in Yantai City	2023
.....		
34	Measures for the Management of Special Funds for Social Organization Development Support in Shandong Province	2021
35	Guiding Opinions of Dongying City on Party Building Leading Social Organizations to Help Ecological Protection and High-quality Development in the Yellow River Basin	2022
36	Changzhou City Supporting Measures for Promoting the High-Quality Development of Social Organizations	2023

4. Research process and modelling

4.1. Open coding

Open coding involved importing 36 policy documents into NVivo12, with 26 coded via node functions and 10 reserved for theoretical saturation. To mitigate researcher bias, line-by-line analysis was identified as key policy measures for coding units ^[17–18]. Iterative text comparison and synonym merging generated 77 initial concepts, subsequently categorized into 32 clusters through axial coding (Table 2). This rigorous process ensured conceptual validity while aligning with grounded theory principles of emergent category development.

Table 2. *Example of open coding results*

Subcategory	Initial concept	Examples of source material
Government Purchase of Services	Government Project Procurement	Social organizations participate in government public service project procurement, as stipulated in “Implementation Measures for Supporting Social Organization Development through Government Purchase of Services” (Kunming City)
	Service Procurement Standards	Government procurement service standards and regulations, including “Procedural Provisions for Social Organizations to Participate in Civil Affairs Policy Formulation and Evaluation” (Shanghai)
	Project Directory Dynamic Management	Dynamic management of government function transfer and public service purchase catalog projects, as outlined in “Implementation Measures for Promoting High-Quality Development of Social Organizations” (Zibo City)

Table 2 (Continued)

Subcategory	Initial concept	Examples of source material
Credit Administration	Credit Rating Standards	Social organizations establish credit rating standards, as specified in “Guidance on Strengthening Party Building and Promoting High-Quality Development of Social Organizations” (Shandong Province)
	Red-Black List Management	Establishment of credit rating and preferential policy linkage system, including red-black list management mechanisms
	Credit Commitment Disclosure System	Credit commitment system and information disclosure platform for social organizations
Rural Revitalization Support	Rural Revitalization Special Funds	Social organizations rural revitalization plan and 2025 village formation projects + characteristic brands, as supported by “Rural Revitalization Special Funds”
	Poverty Alleviation Special Funds	Social organizations “double hundred poverty alleviation” action special funds, as outlined in poverty alleviation policies
	Thousand Villages Action	“Thousand villages social organizations help rural areas” special action, promoting rural development
Digital Construction	Smart City Digital Platform	Smart city digital platform construction, as part of digital transformation initiatives
	Declaration Information Platform	Social organizations online declaration digital service system, improving service efficiency
	Intelligent Service Matching System	“Smart service” cross-border integration system construction, enhancing service capabilities
	Mobile Service Platform	Social organizations mobile convenient service system, as mentioned in digital construction policies
Evaluating of Incentives	Rating Assessment Incentive Mechanism	Social organizations rating assessment incentive fund allocation (5A=3, 4A=0.6, 3A=0.3), as specified in assessment standards
	Rating Fund Allocation Mechanism	Establishment of rating incentive fund allocation system (3A and above), promoting quality improvement
	Rating Assessment Standards	Rating assessment incentive standards (3A=1, 4A=2, 5A=4), encouraging organizational development
Incubation Support	Incubation Operation Support	Social organizations incubation operation fund allocation (municipal: 60,000 yuan, county: 30,000 yuan), as supported by incubation policies
	Incubation Base Fund Support	Social organizations incubation base construction fund support, promoting organizational growth
	Incubation Service Support	Social organizations incubation service operation support, enhancing service capabilities
Party Building Support	Party Building Special Funds	Party building fund support, as outlined in “Guidance on Strengthening Party Building and Promoting High-Quality Development of Social Organizations”
	Party Organization Special Funds	Social organizations party organization special funds (3000 yuan), supporting party building activities
	Party Building Guidance System	Party guidance personnel/party building personnel guidance system, strengthening organizational leadership
Industry Integration Services	Industry Chain Collaborative Platform	Industry association promotion and industry chain collaborative service platform, as mentioned in industry integration policies
	Industry Chain Collaborative Platform	Industry cluster industry chain collaborative service platform, promoting collaborative development
	Industry Chain Service Support	Industry chain “chain leader” special fund support, encouraging industry integration

4.2. Axial coding

Axial coding synthesized 32 open categories through policy text analysis, revealing intrinsic linkages. Iterative refinement generated 14 higher-order concepts (e.g., Political Leadership and Industry Chain Integration). These were clustered into five dimensions: Institutional Safeguard System, Organizational Development Foundation Capacity Building, Performance-Driven Incentives, Strategic Synergy Value Network, and Socialized Governance Participatory Mechanisms. This hierarchical coding constructed a policy-driven framework, mapping how governance structures (e.g., carrier construction) interact with incentive systems (e.g., performance orientation) to shape organizational evolution. The process adhered to grounded theory principles, ensuring theoretical coherence between micro-level policy elements and macro-level developmental logic ^[19]. Results are systematized in **Table 3**.

Table 3. *Axial coding results*

Core category	Main category	Subcategory
Institutional Safeguard System	Political Leadership	Party Building Support, Standardization of Party Building, Branding of Party Building
	Operational Norms	Internal Governance, Financial Management, Standardized Construction
	Behavioral Constraints	Credit Administration
Organizational Development Foundation Capacity Building	Carrier Construction	Incubation Support, Integrated Incubation, Rural Revitalization Support
	Human Capital	Cultivation of Talent, Talent Incentives, Human Resources Norms
	Technology-Enabled	Digital Construction
Performance-Driven Incentives	Performance-Oriented	Evaluating of Incentives, Quality Assessment, Brand Development
	Service Innovation	Government Purchase of Services, Service Model Innovations, Service Network Building
	Quality Control	Quality Control, Project Monitoring
Strategic Synergy Value Network	Industry Chain Integration	Industry Integration Services, Innovation Ecosystems, International Expansion
	Space Linkage	Regional Collaborative Networks, Coordinated Development Network
	Policy Focus	Incentives For Sustainable Development, Cultural Heritage Support, Industry-Oriented Cultivation
Socialized Governance Participatory Mechanisms	Channel Construction	Democratization of Decision-Making
	Governance Tools	Monitoring of Policy Effectiveness

4.3. Selective coding and model construction

Selective coding identified the “Foundation—Capacity—Power—Collaborate—Value” five-dimensional system as the core category. Iterative analysis synthesized prior categories, articulating dimensions: Institutional Safeguards, Capacity Building, Performance Incentives, Strategic Synergy Networks, and Participatory Governance. The narrative begins with central or provincial policy formulation (e.g., Civil Affairs mandates), progresses through dimension-specific mechanisms (e.g., carrier construction for capacity, industry integration for synergy), and culminates in a dynamic model where institutional frameworks enable performance-driven empowerment, fostering collaborative value creation. This model delineates how hierarchical governance (political leadership) interacts with grassroots participation (socialized mechanisms) to drive organizational.

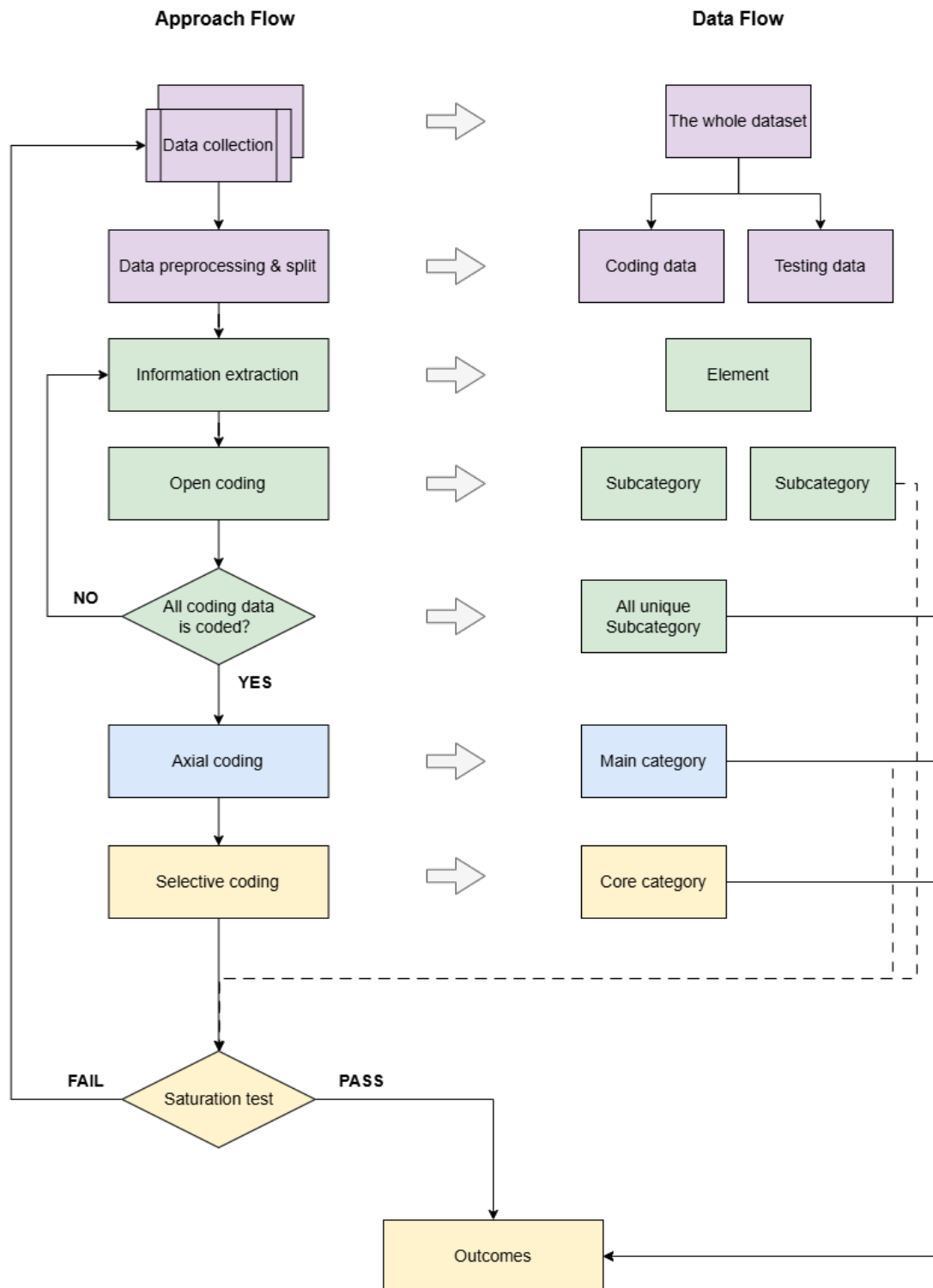


Figure 1. Framework of the Grounded Theory (GT) approach

4.4. Theoretical saturation test

To ensure the completeness and reliability of the theoretical model constructed, a theory saturation test was conducted. In this process, in accordance with the general practice of Grounded Theory, this paper continued to code, conceptualize, and categorize the 10 policy documents set aside; no new concepts and categories

were refined, and no new logical links emerged between the categories. After many iterations of testing and revision, it was finally determined that the theoretical model had reached saturation and was able to reflect more comprehensively and accurately the pathway system of local governments exploring the high-quality development of social organizations (**Figure 2**).

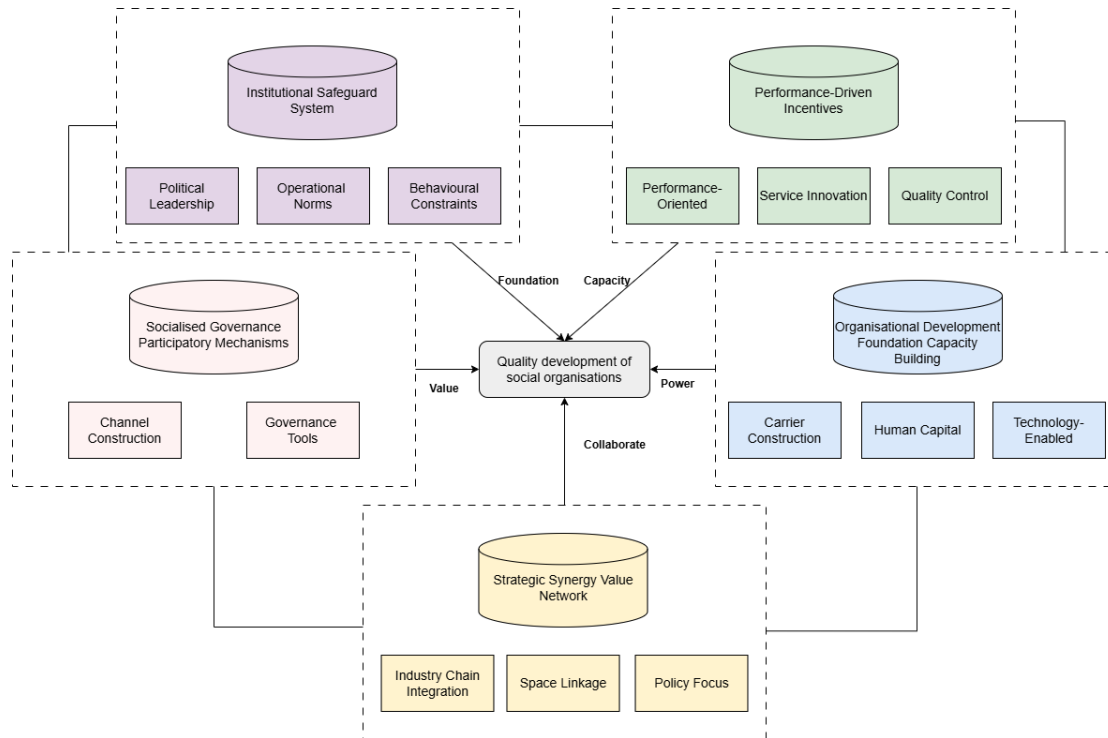


Figure 2. *Model construction*

5. Model interpretation and pathway system analysis

5.1. Institutional safeguard system (Foundation)

Serving as the bedrock for the high-quality development of social organizations, the institutional safeguard System solidifies their foundation through three core components: Political leadership, operational norms, and behavioral constraints. Political leadership works by party building support (requiring setting up party groups and activities), Standardization of party building (setting rules for ideas and procedures), and branding of party building (building a good reputation for party values). This ensures party groups guide social organizations correctly.

Operational norms make sure organizations follow clear rules. For example, internal governance uses councils and supervisory boards to improve fair decision-making. Financial management controls how money is used and checked to keep finances safe and clear. Standardized construction sets quality standards for services and daily work.

Behavioral constraints focus on credit administration. This means collecting credit data, sharing it publicly, and punishing dishonest actions. It rewards good behavior and stops bad behavior to keep organizations trustworthy.

These three parts connect party leadership with practical rules. Party groups guide big decisions, while financial checks and member participation keep organizations responsible. Credit systems also push organizations

to follow socialist values. Together, they create a clear, rule-based environment where organizations work properly under China's governance system.

In summary, an institutional safeguard system composed of political leadership, operational norms, and credit constraints provides a stable and predictable environment for social organizations to grow. However, an external "safety net" alone is insufficient. On this solid institutional foundation, the logical next step for policy is to focus on actively cultivating the internal core competencies and professional management skills of these organizations. This is precisely the central task of the next dimension in the model: Organizational development foundation capacity building (capacity).

5.2. Organizational development foundation capacity building (Capacity)

Built upon this stable institutional foundation, this dimension systematically enhances the inherent strengths of social organizations. It builds their capacity through three main strategies: Carrier construction, human capital, and technology-enabled methods.

Carrier construction focuses on Incubation support as it allocates workspaces, equipment, and project resources within specialized bases. It constructs integrated incubation frameworks that tie into rural revitalization support, aiding NGOs in solving rural challenges.

Human capital forms the systems of the developed talent through cultivation of talent (training and workshops), talent incentive (higher remuneration and enhanced career progression), and human resources norms (formulated norms guiding personnel management).

Simultaneously, technology-enabled alterations further the digital construction requirement of the NGOs' use of big data and AI ^[20]. Finally, this achievement that services are better, work is faster, and the coverage of the population is constantly expanding can be realized.

This is a combination of physical assets, such as the incubation centers, people investments, such as the training systems, and technology upgrades, such as online service platforms. For instance, automated systems alongside AI-powered chatbots mentorship aids new NGOs to grow, and fair rewards retain skilled workers while enhancing service quality through smart tools ^[21–23]. These initiatives make certain vital goals, like aiding rural regions or integrating advanced technology into routine tasks, thoroughly work on. Through systematic investments in carriers, talent, and technology, the core capacities of social organizations are significantly enhanced. At this point, they possess the potential to deliver high-quality services and engage in public sector competition. More importantly, to effectively translate this "potential" into sustained social action and measurable outcomes, a performance-driven incentives (power) system becomes essential. It empowers organizations through external validation and rewards, ensuring their developmental trajectory remains aligned with the public interest.

5.3. Performance-driven incentives (Power)

This dimension is designed to empower organizations through effective rewards and accountability. Hence, the authors label it "Power." It allocates these performance-driven incentives primarily through two mechanisms: being performance-oriented and encouraging service innovation.

Performance-oriented and service innovation. With the evaluating of incentives system, the NGO's operation, service quality, and social value have to pass their markers" holistic evaluation grade check. Monetarily rewarding them or assigning them favorable priority undertakings to improve their brand development are some of the rewards for exemplary output.

For service innovation, the government's purchase of services pays NGOs to provide specialized public services. It also supports service model innovations (e.g., teaming with businesses) and service network building to connect groups and improve services.

Quality control uses two tools: Project monitoring tracks service work using data tools, and regular checks fix problems. This system mixes competition (e.g., performance rankings) with new ideas (like digital tools). For example, funding depends on results, and training helps NGOs try creative solutions.

In summary, strict quality assessment rules, government service buying, and teamwork networks create a flexible system. This makes NGOs both follow rules and try new ideas, improving services while staying efficient. Guided by performance incentives, a group of efficient, innovative, and reputable social organizations emerges, having not only improved their service quality but also gained greater resources and recognition. As these successfully empowered organizations mature, the limitations of operating in isolation become apparent. To tackle pressing complex social problems and achieve economies of scale, they must move beyond their organizational boundaries to build a Strategic Synergy Value Network (Collaborate), thereby enabling a leap from individual growth to ecosystem-wide prosperity.

5.4. Strategic synergy value network (Collaborate)

Once organizations are empowered with developmental momentum, the strategic synergy value network guides them to collaborate. It encourages a shift from isolated operations to collective success through three pillars: Industry chain integration, space linkage, and policy focus.

First, Industry integration services encourage innovation ecosystems by connecting schools, businesses, and research groups. International expansion compels non-governmental organizations and other similar entities to join forces with foreign partners in order to optimize global philanthropy.

As the second step, space linkage forms regional collaborative networks. This entails that NGOs partner with governments, businesses, and other stakeholders in order to mobilize resources within regions to establish coordinated development networks.

Thirdly, in policy focus, incentives for sustainable development (such as funding green projects), cultural heritage support (saving traditions through digital means), and industry-oriented cultivation (mentoring for particular sectors) are integrated.

Through this network, NGOs assume a central role. For instance, the industry chain integration enables prompt response to market demands by NGOs. AI tool applications are tested in innovation ecosystems. Gaps between urban and rural services are addressed in regional collaborative networks. Joint project tax exemptions and defined partnership regulations can become additional policy support. This aligns NGO objectives with national cultural preservation and green competency promotion plans.

This strategic network effectively connects previously disparate social organizations, government bodies, businesses, and research institutions into a powerful and synergistic force. This networked collaboration not only amplifies the impact of individual entities but, more importantly, it creates the conditions for them to participate systemically in deeper levels of social governance. The model's final stage, socialized governance participatory mechanisms (value), is built upon this collaborative foundation, providing the institutionalized channels and tools for organizations to convert their professional capacity and network resources into tangible public value and governance efficacy.

5.5. Socialized governance participatory mechanisms (Value)

Ultimately, social organizations realize their final social value through participatory mechanisms. This is achieved through a combination of channel construction and governance tools, which enable them to deeply engage in the co-creation of public value.

Channel construction devises diverse methods of NGO decision-making participation, including policy advising, community consultations, and multi-group cooperation. It also streamlines information dissemination between the government and NGOs.

At the same time, governance tools use new methods like third-party policy checks. This lets NGOs act as independent watchdogs in monitoring policy effectiveness. NGOs use their skills to check if policies work well and suggest improvements, which also increases their voice in governance.

These two parts work together and form a collaborative force. Specifically, channel construction helps NGOs connect people's needs to government actions through fixed channels (e.g., discussion meetings). Governance tools turn NGOs into quality checkers using clear evaluation rules. To illustrate, digital surveys let citizens share opinions easily, while data tools measure policy impacts. Of note, monitoring of policy effectiveness is not just about watching; it pushes governments to improve policies and lets NGOs help shape rules.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzes 36 local policy documents through Grounded Theory and constructs a five-dimensional model of “Foundation—Capacity—Power—Collaborate—Value” to reveal the policy logic of local governments in fostering social organizations: first, the institutional guarantee system is constructed through political leadership, normative operation and constraining mechanism to consolidate the foundation of development; second, the organizations’ basic capacity is strengthened by carrier construction and human and technical inputs; and ultimately, the organizations are motivated by effectiveness. Finally, through the linkage of efficiency incentives, strategic synergy, and governance participation mechanisms, a closed-loop path from efficiency improvement to value creation is formed.

Admittedly, there are three limitations in the study: insufficient sample coverage may affect the representativeness of the conclusions, the risk of subjective bias in the Grounded Theory approach, and it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on the interaction mechanism of the dimensions and practical issues.

In the future, some optimized suggestions should be recommended. To be specific, comparative research should be adopted to explore cross-regional policy models to enhance adaptability. Empirical methods should be combined with the current method to assess the effectiveness of policy implementation. In addition, the research on the synergy mechanism between social organizations, the government, and the market, with a focus on the mechanism of resource integration, distribution of power and responsibility, and coordination of interests, should be deeply paid attention to. It can provide theoretical support and practical solutions to promote the construction of a modernized social governance system.

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