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Effectiveness of resource management of Lebanese NGOs in response to COVID-19 and the Syrian crisis

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Crises are appearing widely in different regions of the world. The Syrian war was considered one of the largest humanitarian crises where Lebanon hosted many displaced Syrians. Recently, the coronavirus outbreak coincided with a severe socio-political and economic crisis in the country. COVID-19 affected NGOs' response to the community and refugees. Henceforth, the study examined NGO activities and strategies in response to the Syrian refugee crisis during and after COVID-19 to identify future effective practices. The paper is based on qualitative data. Forty representatives from NGOs in Lebanon participated in semi-structured interviews. They reported on (i) the influence of COVID-19 on NGOs' activities, (ii) effective strategies for supporting Syrian refugees and the host community, and (iii) evaluation of NGOs' achievements and failures to provide services for the community during COVID-19. Data disclosed that COVID-19 enhanced the need for different activities to support refugees and the host community but failed to procure funds and get the necessary support from the funding agencies. The paper suggested that both government and donor agencies should enhance support for NGOs during crisis times, with better communication among stakeholders being crucial. A resource dependency theory was developed and supported by stakeholder perspectives. Based on the research findings, implications, and future research suggestions are proposed.

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) has affected almost every aspect of global society, spawning an array of health, social, and economic issues since its first detection in 2019 (McKee and Stuckler, 2020). The COVID-19 outbreaks in Lebanon occurred at a time when the country was hosting approximately one million Syrian refugees living in precarious conditions (Bartels et al., 2021), with an ongoing distributive political environment, an unsteady economic condition, and a depreciated health system (Fouad et al., 2021). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted refugees and host communities in Lebanon, exacerbating the Syrian refugee crisis in the country.

Conversely, 50 years of experience and studies in numerous nations have demonstrated that governments need help to meet the needs of the people (Daynes, 2017; Yan et al., 2018). Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) mediate between government agencies and endangered populations (Portney and Cuttler, 2010). They are very crucial when it comes to helping people in need. Therefore, NGOs respond to humanitarian crises, taking part in societal responses to the COVID-19 crisis and offering relief and humanitarian assistance during public health, natural, and humanitarian crises (Doerfel et al., 2013). The civil emergency response system for pre-disaster planning, disaster response, and post-disaster assistance considers numerous NGOs' routine participation (Lai et al., 2019).

In response to the pressures of displacement, the NGO sector in Lebanon has been active and robust since the late nineteenth century (AbouAssi, 2015; Chaaban and Seyfert, 2012). According to AbouAssi (2006), the estimated number of NGOs in Lebanon is 15,000, and they are active in all aspects and domains of public life. Some NGOs without any external affiliation are primarily concerned with studying the social conditions in Lebanon and proposing ways to improve them (Hamdar and Sabe, 2017). Other NGOs collaborate with other organizations to promote human and citizenship awareness programs within communities and training and education on child rights. Also, they are a part of the largest humanitarian networks in the world. Some NGOs have a religious character and aim to improve people's lives in Lebanon, provide health services to families affected by the war's aftermath, empower women and orphans, and create strategic partnerships with political and social development organizations (Hamdar and Sabe, 2017).

Moreover, UN agencies, joint donors, and other international organizations have a substantial presence in Lebanon (AbouAssi, 2015). They favor working with NGOs over the government (AbouAssi, 2015). However, some have limited activities due to poor governance and public support (Hamdar and Sabe, 2017). In addition, a significant obstacle for Lebanese NGOs is the need for systematic participatory approaches and needs assessment studies (AbouAssi and Trent, 2013). Therefore, adequate financial, human, and technological resources remain inadequate (AbouAssi, 2015).

As COVID-19 spread, the need for food assistance, shelter, and other necessities grew, with NGO intervention necessary to assist. However, NGOs faced pressure to meet the demands, where a noteworthy portion of their employees were lost because of poor health (Santos and Laureano, 2021). Due to the pandemic's personnel shortage, numerous organizations could not run programs, raise funds, or serve beneficiaries (Santos and Laureano, 2021). Inadequately, vulnerable individuals had access to fewer services, and a decrease in NGO funding hindered the ability to provide services (Wilke et al., 2020). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sudden shift in organizational functioning necessitates operational changes and a new strategic vision (Rottkamp, 2021).

In this outstanding crisis, researchers must urgently assist the non-profit sector by determining how COVID-19 affects organizations' ability to continue operations and its impact on the at-risk population (Santos and Laureano, 2021; Wilke et al., 2020). Despite the growing number of studies and reports on the various organizational responses to the pandemic (e.g., Beaton, 2020; Dipendra et al., 2020; Deitrick et al., 2020; Stefan et al., 2020), the majority of them focus on the US organizations derived from various states (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). In addition, qualitative research is required to evaluate NGOs' accomplishments influencing their development during the pandemic (Waniak-Michalak et al., 2022).

This study aims to fill this gap by evaluating the effects of COVID-19 on NGOs and identifying their resource managerial practices during refugee crises, Examining the effectiveness of organizations' interventions in providing support to vulnerable refugee populations and the host community in response to the COVID-19 epidemic and refugee crises contributes to the existing literature.

The study was based on resource dependency theory, which considers the risk of crises and recognizes that the survival of an organization depends on the resources available to the organization (Plaisance, 2021). Based on the resource dependency theory, this study emphasizes humanitarian efforts during the Syrian refugee crisis and COVID-19.

The escalating crisis in the region and the limited support options for NGOs in countries such as Lebanon prompted a question about how NGO activities are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, seeking answers regarding the accomplishments and gaps during pandemic management and the effective practices for post-COVID-19 and other crises is crucial. The significance of this study lies in a better understanding of the effect of COVID-19 on NGOs' activities serving refugees and how these organizations can best assist them during the crisis. Furthermore, it is crucial to determine ways to support and better assist this population in times of distress for this case and to prepare for any upcoming worldwide crisis (Wilke et al., 2020). Finally, including the refugee crisis and COVID-19 gives this study a particular advantage and novelty.

Our study aims to investigate the perceptions of NGO representatives working with refugees regarding the influence of COVID-19 and the efficacy of their intervention to identify effective resource managerial practices for a more effective response to future crises. The following research questions were developed following the objective of the study:

RQ1: How did COVID-19 influence the activities of Lebanon NGOs during the refugee crisis?

RQ2: What resource managerial practices must be identified by NGOs during crises?

RQ3: What management strategies should be taken by NGOs during the refugee crisis?

In support of our research, an inductive qualitative methodology is utilized to examine how NGOs responded to COVID-19 and the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. Two distinct sampling strategies were employed, reaching 40 organizations. Data were collected through semi-structured telephone and face-to-face interviews where NGO leaders and social actors were among the research participants. A thematic analysis was conducted. Different themes were revealed to interpret the study findings: (i) the influence of the pandemic on NGO activities; (ii) the effective strategies for filling the gaps; (iii) the evaluation of the NGO's achievements and gaps in services offered for the community during COVID-19.

The structure of our study is organized as follows: in the subsequent sections, the research context and related literature

and theoretical framework are presented, and the impact of COVID-19 on NGO activities and their adopted strategies for supporting refugees and host communities are discussed. Following this is the methodology, which delves into the data collection, analysis, and sampling techniques. The results of the interviews are subsequently analyzed. Finally, the conclusion discusses the findings, limitations, and future recommendations.

Syrian refugees and COVID-19 in the Lebanese context

Lebanon came across its first case of coronavirus disease on February 21, 2020. Nonetheless, the initial action phase required a clear plan for adapting the pandemic response to the country's most vulnerable groups. Hence, others, such as refugees, detainees, and older people, have been excluded. Furthermore, the government's action plan did not provide financial or social assistance to vulnerable groups or sectors affected by the pandemic (UN, 2020). With basic needs procurement, an estimated 55% of the total workforce and 95% of the non-Lebanese workforce earned a wage, resulting in unprecedented hardships (ILO, 2020). As a result of the quarantine's impact on their employment and income, vulnerable individuals experienced financial stress (Wang and Tang, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to support them, particularly during disease outbreaks (Alizadeh et al., 2020). UNHCR strengthened the preparedness to respond to COVID-19 by establishing isolation amenities, increasing hospital capability, securing all testing and treatment costs for refugee patients, community engagement, and providing awareness (UNHCR, 2020). As the nation is experiencing major pandemic expansions with devastating effects on the refugee population, these efforts must be maintained and expanded (Fouad et al., 2021).

COVID-19 as an exogenous shock

The International Monetary Fund defined Exogenous shocks as "sudden events beyond the control of the authorities that have a significant negative impact on the economy" (Geithner, 2003, p. 4). Therefore, exogenous shocks generate unpredictable risks or opportunities (Trkman and McCormack, 2009). They may imply unfavorable internal conditions, such as losing human capital, causing the unavailability of productive skills or technical knowledge (Noy and Nualsri, 2007; Geithner, 2003). Moreover, exogenous shocks can noticeably impact an organization's core business or target markets, restricting its access to vital resources or its capacity to pursue growth opportunities (Chakrabarti, 2015). Furthermore, exogenous shocks impact organizations and drive them to adjust their strategies, business models, structures, and business processes to respond to changing conditions and avoid extinction (Martins et al., 2015).

COVID-19, similar to earthquakes, floods, and wars, is considered an unanticipated exogenous shock which affects the whole population. Prior to COVID-19, NGOs already needed more resource management. However, exogenous crisis complicates access to these resources (Plaisance, 2021). In this research, we view COVID-19 as an exogenous shock affecting non-profit organizations, requiring them to respond to the crisis sustainably.

Theoretical framework

In the context of COVID-19, evaluating the impact of the crisis on NGOs' initiatives and identifying their resource managerial practices may provide solutions for the sustainability of local communities. This research emphasizes the humanitarian activities undertaken during the Syrian refugee crisis and COVID-19 based on Resource Dependence Theory (RDT). RDT is often used to review non-profit organizations' survival and performance (Hodge and Piccolo, 2005). Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) first introduced the theory to explain how organizations depend on

resources to survive, but they are scarce. Furthermore, the theory also mentions the existence of an unfavorable environment in the organization: stakeholders may face bad intentions, interests may differ, and global crises may arise (Plaisance, 2021).

Previous studies about humanitarian aid initiatives from an RDT standpoint are done to observe how NGOs obtain the essential resources to reach their assumed mission or support humanitarian causes (Prasad et al., 2016). Several studies considered RDT in Non-profits focused on funding, planning, and performance (Barman, 2008; Delfin and Tang, 2008; Dunn, 2008; Mosley, 2011; Thomson, 2010; Stone and Brush, 1996; Verbruggen et al., 2011; Webster and Wylie, 1988). The literature also revealed different studies considering RDT with governance (Hudock, 1995; Stone, 1996; Miller-Millesen, 2003; Stone et al., 2001; Tschirhart et al., 2009), policy engagement (Schmid et al., 2008); self-regulation (Bies, 2010), and collaboration (Borman, 2010; Guo and Acar, 2005; Sowa, 2009; Yanacopulos, 2005).

Simultaneously, this theory consents the research of the NGOs' dependence on the resources of other parties concerned in fulfilling their mission and providing humanitarian aid, leading to the understanding of operational processes from the standpoint of a dependency relationship between NGOs, state institutions, business environment, and the community (Prasad et al., 2016). Accordingly, Lai and Fu (2020), communication and organizational accountability create a positive collaboration between an organization and its stakeholders in acquiring the required resources.

COVID-19 and its impact on NGO's activities serving Syrian refugees

The extraordinary scope and velocity of the COVID-19 pandemic's alterations impacted various NGOs' fields of operation (McMullin and Raggo, 2020). Strict lockdowns were imposed in response to the unprecedented spread of disease, preventing non-governmental organizations and community organizations from providing critical aid (Portney and Cuttler, 2010; Schwartz and Yen, 2017). In addition, lockdowns hindered the ability of NGOs to assess the needs and build capacity in problem areas. For instance, caseworkers fail to visit families and monitor the safety of children (Goldman et al., 2020). Besides, this stresses the lives of many Syrian refugees already under extreme economic pressure (Wilke et al., 2020).

In this regard, demand for services delivered by NGOs has increased in numerous regions due to the pandemic devastating their financial and human resources and forcing them frequently to adjust and settle a new performance (Wilke et al., 2020). As a result, most organizations were forced to alter their plans and cancel fundraising events. In addition, they have had difficulty reaching beneficiaries or delivering services during the lockdown (EFA, 2020). Simultaneously, donations and services of numerous non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and their personnel capacity decreased (EFA, 2020). Their predominant fears embrace income loss and disruptions in cash flow; attainment and attracting supporters; human resources issues involving payroll, distant-work management, anxiety and health; and service provision and meeting beneficiaries' and clients' needs (Stewart et al., 2021; EFA, 2020). On the other hand, a visible increase in donations was seen by philanthropic foundations (Finchum-Mason et al., 2020), confirming that they are also changing the way they support their grantees, such as decreasing reporting requests, offering supplementary grant funding, which is unrestricted (Mikołajczak et al., 2022).

Meanwhile, financial challenges also affected employee morale and organizational mission conflicts (McMullin and Raggo, 2020). Therefore, organizations must respond and adapt to the

dramatic alterations due to the pandemic worldwide and accordingly manage the workforce (Carnevale and Hatak, 2020), creating demanding conditions for Human Resource Management (HRM) (Gigauri, 2020). The pandemic and its chaos greatly affected NGOs' capacity (Mikołajczak et al., 2022), leading to meaningful changes in the work environment, such as remote work and team instability (Young et al., 2020). As virtual work intensifies, HRM has managed employee stress by removing work and family boundaries (Giurge and Bohns, 2020). Thus, the pandemic led to less socialization, which has implications for the employees' mental health (Singer-Velush et al., 2020), in addition to a reduction in working hours or pay cuts (Stewart et al., 2021). Hence, HR practitioners arranged virtual meetings or online connections to sustain employee motivation and productivity (Singer-Velush et al., 2020). COVID-19 also affected employee participation in decision-making and their capability to collaborate (Levine and McCambridge, 2020). Moreover, some countries highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on human resources. For instance, organizations in Europe, the UK, and Poland mentioned decreased staff and volunteers (EFA, 2020).

NGO's strategies for supporting refugees and host community

In order to survive and continue their operations, NGOs adapted in various ways and on a wide range of fronts (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). Many NGOs have implemented new service delivery models, such as significantly expanding their online presence (EFA, 2020). As a response to the shifting needs of an organization's various stakeholder groups, readjusting different programs is needed as a strategy, in addition to searching for new revenue streams, cooperating with other organizations, and staying connected in different ways with stakeholders, communities, and the general public, as well as implementing technology solutions (Rottkamp, 2021). Although transformation in strategies has many facets and is multifaceted, organizations are already making efforts to make changes in response to COVID-19, which is viewed by some as a chance to move forward and innovate new business model or vision (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). Using the pandemic and related preventive measures, NGOs will need to innovate through a re-evaluation of their strategies for service delivery, which can aid in identifying effective solutions. As a result, activities, timelines, resources, and limitations may alter (Wilke et al., 2020).

Adapting strategies to constraints, such as employing remote monitoring and virtual support for vulnerable families, has been deemed useful by many (Wong et al., 2020). Additionally, training or support groups should be converted to a digital format that enables programs to continue providing services (Wong et al., 2020).

In the meantime, investment in building relationships, communicating and collaborating on financial opportunities, and team stability and engagement are beneficial for the future of NGOs (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). However, enabling connection is a crucial supporting role that can convey hope, create avenues for connection, and normalize efforts to limit the undesirable effects of the epidemic and preventive measures (Usher et al., 2020a; Usher et al., 2020b). Nevertheless, NGOs should bolster community resources and networks to better respond to the epidemic and related preventions, promoting a long-term sustainability and safety framework for the communities (Wilke et al., 2020).

Concerned with raising sufficient funds, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) utilize a broader range of networks by modifying their fundraising policies, incorporating digital tools, and adopting various strategies (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). Moreover, numerous organizations paid additional attention to

increasing their donations and launching an emergency appeal for support from corporate partners (EFA, 2020). NGOs were also exhilarated to seek out novel and diversified sources of revenue (Johnson et al., 2021). Although most NGOs' programs and finances were impacted immediately, organizations with lower reserves were more likely to minimize operating hours, lay off employees, or have trouble obtaining supplies and retailer services. Therefore, they were more likely to face increased service requests during the pandemic (Kim and Mason, 2020).

Methods

A crisis is a situation that signals an imminent threat to a country's population or fundamental values and prompts a political response under time constraints and uncertainty (Brecher et al., 2020). COVID-19 nonetheless falls under the category of crisis (Lipsy, 2020). In such situations, humanitarian agencies and governments require rapid access to accurate data on specific shocks, scales, and geographic locations to respond quickly and effectively to the crisis (Mueller et al., 2023). Although quantitative data are advantageous in providing key indicators for humanitarian disaster targeting and rapid aid response, qualitative methods provide insight into experiences and opinions during and after disasters (Mueller et al., 2023), which can complement and extend the quantification and standardization of fundamental human needs (Merry, 2021; Lawson, 2021). In addition, qualitative data can provide important information about the complexity of unfolding scenarios, such as personal experiences of livelihood struggles and the evolution of vulnerabilities over time (Ogueji et al., 2021; Nakhaei et al., 2015; Raven et al., 2018). According to Mueller et al. (2023), recovery and renewal following a disaster can be facilitated by realizing specific insights during the experience. Thus, multiple studies reveal the significance of qualitative data for understanding and responding to crises and disasters (Mueller et al., 2023). For instance, a study on the 2014–2015 Ebola crisis in Liberia adopted qualitative disaster research, allowing data to be gathered quickly and cheaply when researchers could not visit communities (Etang and Himelein, 2020). Therefore, qualitative studies are essential in the case of COVID-19 in order to fill critical knowledge gaps, going beyond standard health crisis data for a deeper understanding of disasters' impacts (Mueller et al., 2023).

The current study employed an inductive qualitative methodology to evaluate the effects of COVID-19 on NGOs and identify their resource managerial practices during refugee crises. A multi-case study approach is utilized (Yin, 2009) to offer several perspectives on the event under analysis (Creswell and Poth, 2016, p. 75). The current research case guided through qualitative methodology proved crucial to theory building (Santos and Laureano, 2023). Therefore, the present study focuses on the perceptions of different stakeholders with different roles working in NGOs serving Syrian refugees and host communities, including children, persons with disabilities, youth, older people and all vulnerable people affected by the Syrian crisis and the pandemic.

Sampling technique. In this research, we employed two distinct sampling techniques to maximize the number of participants. First, NGO representatives, who are assumed to be the most qualified and knowledgeable in their respective fields, are sampled based on their expertise (Etikan and Bala, 2017; Creswell and Clark, 2011). With the assistance of experts, we also utilized snowball sampling to increase the sample size.

The current research was conducted with a convenience sample of 40 NGOs, from which 12 of them are international while 28 are local. Specifically, three NGOs are concerned with people with disabilities, offering educational, health and social

services and empowerment. Five other NGOs represent scouts targeting youth aiming for informal education through outdoor activities. Twelve NGOs focus on emergency relief, such as offering goods, services and food assisting programs for needy people, including Syrian refugees and host communities. Three NGOs emphasize advancing literacy and autonomous learning for unprivileged children, addressing communities' educational, cultural and psychological needs by offering services such as homework support, early childhood education, and summer school. Nine NGOs are dedicated to abolishing all types of social discrepancies, relying on voluntary work to apply justice among people within the same society through community service, youth and women empowerment, child development and advocacy. Four NGOs are devoted to preparing the community to respond to emergencies, disasters, and crises by providing financial assistance for the affected vulnerable families, offering primary health and mental health care and strengthening organizational development efforts. Three NGOs support women and girls to protect them from gender-based violence and discrimination to fight inequality and end poverty and injustice. Only one NGO aims to work on policy development, legal reform, capacity building, and human rights monitoring to protect human rights, especially marginalized groups such as women, children, and youth. The sample included micro, small, medium-sized, and large non-profits, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of the impact of COVID-19 on organizations of different sizes and their resource managerial practices during the refugee crisis.

Data collection process. Data were gathered through semi-structured telephone and in-person interviews. This study surveyed NGOs in Lebanon that provide various services to refugees to understand better the pandemic's effect (refer to Table 1). Since the names of participants and organizations are not disclosed due to the confidentiality principle, participants are referred to by the codes NGO1 and NGO2. During our data collection process, we attempted to reach 60 interviewees from a variety of non-profit organizations; however, the study reports responses from only 40 of the 60 organizations, taking into consideration various parameters, such as the scope of the study, the nature of our topic, the study design, and the quality of the data (Ogden and Cornwell, 2010), who deemed this sample size acceptable and who recommend conducting no more than 50

interviews to reach statistical significance (Bernard, 2002). The NGOs were chosen for the study based on their accessibility and willingness to share their perspectives and experiences.

Data analysis. Thematic analysis was applied to the primary data for analysis purposes. This method interprets and classifies existing themes to refine the data (Boyatzis, 1998). The data were displayed and categorized based on their similarities and differences using direct quotations from interviewees (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data were coded and categorized using NVIVO 12 Software. Several themes were created to interpret the study's findings (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For more accurate interview results, all data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and checked by participants (Miles et al., 2014).

Results

Our thematic analysis revealed three main themes: (i) the influence of the pandemic on NGO activities, (ii) the effective strategies for filling the gaps, and (iii) the evaluation of the NGO's achievements and failures in services offered to the community during COVID-19.

Table 2 shows that the pressures of displacement and the spread of COVID-19 affected NGOs' Financial and Human resources and their ability to provide services in response to the crises. NGO intervention led to some positive achievements and gaps that need further intervention. Therefore, some strategies were proposed to alleviate the bottlenecks during implementation. These strategies were aimed at achieving the NGO's goals.

Theme 1: The influence of the pandemic on NGO activities.

Our results reveal that the direct impact of COVID-19 on Syrian refugees and the host community was a central theme. The general conclusion was that the pandemic impacted NGOs' financial and human resources, resulting in inadequate services for vulnerable populations. Thus, the most prevalent subthemes were 1) Financial resources of NGOs, 2) Human resources of NGOs, and 3) Service provision by NGOs.

Financial resources of NGOs. The pandemic threatened NGOs' financial resources. Some authors argued that the appearance of the pandemic and its related restrictions triggered a reduction in individual aids, costs for services and event involvement, and membership subscriptions (Stewart et al., 2021; EFA, 2020; Johnson et al., 2021). In this regard, NGOs 4 and 33 highlighted fund shrinkages to support the poorest areas and Syrian refugees. According to NGOs 9 and 34, some types of Funds were oriented worldwide through COVID-19, and some countries can donate funds for Lebanon if they are funding their own countries. Hence, donor behavior is associated with the fuzziness of using donated funds and the struggle for evaluation during the epidemic (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). As NGO 3 stated: "Additional funds were provided to buy equipment and materials", and NGO 10 declared: "The number of donors and beneficiaries increased after the pandemic, which has led us to increase our work efforts to serve the community better" Moreover, NGO representatives mentioned a limited budget hindering them from purchasing the essential resources and materials needed to respond quickly to the crisis because of inflation in prices resulted from the economic instability in the country and the lockdown that pushed the suppliers to close leading to a scarcity of items and an increase in their prices. This finding is limited only to the case of Lebanon; therefore, the authors did not mention this impact on NGOs in any previous study.

Table 1 Study participants.

Participants	Gender	Working Status
NGO 1, 4, 5, 11, 14, 17, 25, 29, 35, 36, 39	Male	Manager
NGO 9, 13, 28, 32, 37	Female	Manager
NGO 6, 8, 10, 16, 18, 19, 24, 26, 33, 40	Male	President
NGO 15, 22, 23	Female	President
NGO 2	Female	Learning facilitator
NGO 3	Male	Head of Social Unit
NGO 7	Female	Quality Control Officer
NGO 12	Female	Shelter Coordinator
NGO 20	Female	Team Leader
NGO 21	Male	Activities Officer
NGO 27	Female	Protection focal point
NGO 30	Female	Case Worker
NGO 31	Female	Communication and research specialist
NGO 34	Female	Field Coordinator
NGO 38	Female	Social Assistance

Table 2 Resource Dependence Theory conceptualized for the study.

Existing Position	The effects of COVID and Syrian war on NGO's Activities	Evaluation of achievements and service gaps during COVID-19	Effective Strategies	Goals of NGOs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressures of Displacement • Spread of COVID-19 • Disruptive Political Environment • Unsteady Economic Condition • Depreciated Health System 	<p>Financial resources of NGOs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund shrinkages • Fund re-orientation • Additional funds for equipment and materials <p>Human resources of NGOs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depletion of human capacity • Lack of meetings • Concerns about employee's safety <p>Service provision by NGOs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays in NGO's performance • Cancellation of some activities • Lack to reach beneficiaries 	<p>Positive achievements</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Innovations and agility in NGOs • Skilled and qualified employees • Executing training and workshops • Team Flexibility • Directing aid • Increasing projects • Awareness sessions • Increasing organization's capital <p>Gaps needing further intervention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time spent studying the local and regional context • Limited resources and funds • Lack of experience • Risk analysis • Lack of information • Economic and Social instability • Weak Lebanese infrastructure • Uncertainty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved Communication • Reorientation of Programs and Activities • Usage of technology • Motivation and Support of Employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource Development • Management Effectiveness • Sustainability • Accountability

Note prepared by the authors based on the study's key findings.

Human resources of NGOs. The COVID-19 pandemic and its tumults greatly impacted NGOs' human resources. According to Akingbola (2020), the pandemic had individual, team, and organizational consequences, including downsizing, distant work matters associated with the dynamics of the team, mental health worries, and schedules of work or the balance between work and life. For example, NGO 4 said: "We have been greatly depleted in terms of human and material capacity to meet the needs of society", while NGO 30 affirmed: "As a staff, we were unable to meet to coordinate and follow-up our projects" NGO 8 was concerned about the safety of its employees and declared the following: "We are concerned about the safety of our employees as an infection of one of the team members without the knowledge of anyone may lead to spreading the virus."

Service provision by NGOs. Within this context, NGOs' ability to serve the community and meet the load of needs was affected due to the pandemic, especially with limited resources. According to Wilke, Howard and Pop (2020), COVID-19 interrupted many dynamic services where NGOs needed help to adjust services to meet the community's prerequisites. Most participants acknowledged delays in the NGO's performance and the cancellation of some of its activities because of COVID-19. According to NGOs 7 and 23, this is due to the restrictive governmental decisions, a lack of communication between different parties, and the exchange of practical experiences. Furthermore, there was a lack to reach beneficiaries because of lockdowns and limited Lebanese infrastructure. For instance, NGO 26 said: "COVID-19 affected our ability to direct contact beneficiaries, which has let them feel that organizations are absent." NGO 35 added: "There was limited access to the community due to the weak infrastructure." Finally, delays were also a result of community resistance to COVID-19. As NGO 2 said: "There was a lack of communicating with neighbours, community and refugees who refuse to cooperate and respond seriously to COVID-19 since they were not convinced about the threats of this pandemic."

Theme 2: Effective strategies for supporting Syrian refugees and the host community. Another theme underlined strategies that effectively support Syrian refugees and the host community. Although the effect of COVID-19 was demoralizing in many contexts, NGOs made a positive difference in caring for refugees and the community during the crisis by identifying different practices. The most frequent subthemes that arose were: 1) Improved Communication; 2) Reorientation of Programs and Activities; 3) Usage of technology; 4) Motivation and Support of Employees.

Improved communication. Participants reported increasing communication with different stakeholders, including growing communication between 1) NGO staff and Syrian refugees and the host community through awareness sessions to alleviate the resistance to COVID-19 and to give guidance on how to deal with its impact 2) staff members to identify the needs based on field assessment and collect data for a faster response to the crisis 3) NGO and local government officials to reorganize the support and coordination and distribution of responsibilities, and 4) NGO to donors to build trustful relationships and get additional funds. In this regard, NGO representatives stated the following:

- "Due to our continuous communication and the international contacts of our organization with different donors, we were able to get much help from abroad in addition to some funds" (NGO 15, Female, President)
- "We increased the awareness among the community to face this pandemic through communication, which has facilitated NGO's response plan" (NGO 40, Male, President)

- “We increased communication between NGOs and all authorities represented by municipalities and government to confront the pandemic and consolidate the efforts” (NGO 21, Male, Activities Officer)
- “We changed our way of communication within the organization. Our meetings became on Zoom, but work continues. We shared the difficulties and success stories” (NGO 18, Male, President).

Reorientation of programs and activities. Based on the need assessment, many NGOs reprioritize their objectives and redirect their programs and activities to respond to the community’s needs. For instance, NGO 7 stated: “We tried supporting the society through distributing food boxes that will be useful for them, especially during lockdowns.” NGO 12 said: “We delayed some activities that are not very important and urgent and considered non-life saving.”

Usage of technology. All participants mentioned the switch from face-to-face work to virtual meetings and activities. NGOs 1, 2, 9, and 11 substituted field visits with online communication with beneficiaries. NGOs 7, 18, and 21 changed their communication by replacing face-to-face meetings and attendance at the office with Zoom meetings to continue their work and accomplish the activities within the timeline.

Motivation and support of employees. Several participants reported the need to motivate the working group and establish bonds of trust between them. There was also particular attention to the care for employees and their safety by introducing different protective measures and precautions while performing the job on the ground to protect the team and the people served from infections.

Theme 3: Evaluation of NGO’s achievements and failures to provide services for the community during COVID-19.

Throughout the data, participants focused on the final theme of NGOs’ response to the pandemic by investigating NGO representatives’ perceptions about managing the pandemic. Findings revealed some positive achievements parallel to other gaps needing further intervention.

Non-profit organizations employed a performance evaluation system for the team and managers to evaluate NGOs’ response to the crisis. However, results showed that NGOs had to respond faster to the pandemic to meet people’s increasing needs.

Despite all the difficulties and challenges, the pandemic somehow introduced innovations and agility in NGOs. It also challenged NGOs to introduce new ways in their future processes, procedures and overall functioning. NGO 20 stated that although the pandemic was a new crisis, NGOs managed the situation successfully due to training and workshops offered for the staff. NGO 19 added: “The NGO was able to adapt to the change by directing aid and obtaining support from different stakeholders because of our organization’s credibility and bearing of responsibility.” NGO 3 had the same opinion and stated that all achievements are based on skilled and qualified employees who were very flexible during the pandemic. NGO 13 stated: “The organization’s capital has increased, and its projects have multiplied, and its role has become greater through spreading the spirit of responsibility and awareness in facing danger.” NGO 32 declared: “Our organization, the municipality, the activists, the medical staff and directors of the dispensaries located within the scope of our town have created a crisis cell to confront this epidemic, which has facilitated the response to the crisis.”

In contrast, there were some gaps in response to the pandemic. As stated by NGO 35:

- “...Although we made some improvements, we are still learning from this pandemic. Therefore, we cannot say we did a very good response because we need facts and practical examples from the community to allow them to evaluate our work fairly. In some places, we succeeded greatly, but in others, we were late in response due to many factors mentioned previously....”

According to the participants, the main reasons behind their late response and inability to serve the community adequately were time spent studying the local and regional context thoroughly, risk analysis, lack of information, weak Lebanese infrastructure, limited resources and funds, and late governmental decisions. NGO 17 said: “We did not have enough information about COVID-19, and we were not ready to respond to such a huge crisis due to Lebanon’s economic and social situation and the lack of resources to face it quickly.” NGO 11 focused on the uncertainty faced by organizations and the lack of experience to respond to the changing climate in a short time and stated the following: “NGOs faced an ambiguity of information about how long the COVID situation would last. Therefore, it was difficult to plan a response and allocate the appropriate resources, especially if one has no estimation of the length of the challenge.”

Discussion and implications

This study investigated the influence of COVID-19 on NGO activities and identified essential resource managerial practices for a more effective response to current and future crises. The main finding is that COVID-19, as an exogenous shock, impacted the NGO’s human resources, financial resources, and ability to offer assistance for the increased needs of the host community and Syrian refugees. This is consistent with the RDT–ST framework developed by Willems et al. (2022), which stated that NGOs face resource pressures through internal stakeholders from employees and operational volunteers. Previous studies also identified financial pressures that seem to fall in with external shocks (Chen, 2022; Grønberg et al., 2020; Lin and Wang, 2016; Shi et al., 2020; Willems et al., 2022).

Despite the negative effects of COVID-19 in many contexts, NGOs responded positively to the pandemic crisis through different practices. First, NGOs improved their communication with different stakeholders. Sharing information and nurturing a sense of community amidst pervasive isolation were fostered through improved communication (Wilke et al., 2020). Second, the pandemic and its linked restrictive measures shifted NGOs’ activities, timelines, resources, and constraints; hence, they should view this change as an opportunity and adapt their strategies to fit new constraints to maintain effectiveness (Wilke et al., 2020). In line with these findings, NGOs studied the social and economic context and assessed the reality and ability to meet needs, considering the existing situation. Third, NGOs employed technology in response to the pandemic by switching from face-to-face to virtual work. This is along with the results of research by Grønberg et al. (2020), who indicated that the stay-at-home order was motivated by extensive efforts by NGOs to manage the delivery and receipt of services through the telephone or internet platforms, both for non-profit organizations and customers. Finally, NGOs procured motivation and support for their employees. Practices geared towards helping people feel connected, competent, and supported, including supporting increased training, self-care, and creating predictable routines, are essential during the pandemic (Wilke et al., 2020). However, after evaluating NGOs’ response to the pandemic by investigating

NGO representatives' perceptions about managing the pandemic. Findings revealed the introduction of innovation and agility in NGOs due to COVID-19 through introducing new ways in their future practices, offering training and workshops, and having skilled and qualified employees.

Chikwanda (2020) states that the consequences forced by the pandemic and the changes in NGO processes can also lead to positive alterations in cultural adaptations for more flexibility and paperlessness. Regardless of the achievements of NGOs, recent studies (Kim and Mason, 2020; Young et al., 2020) endorse the excessive effect of the COVID-19 outbreak on NGO activities, management, work environment and overall condition. Findings reported that NGOs had to respond faster to the pandemic to meet people's increasing needs. This late response was due to insufficient time and information, weak Lebanese infrastructure, limited resources, and late governmental decisions.

Theoretical implications. The current research findings invite scholars to reconsider their approach to crisis management in the face of exogenous shocks such as COVID-19 within non-profit organizations, as theoretical models must include these resources and managerial practices for an effective intervention to respond to any upcoming crisis. Second, enlightening the effect of COVID-19 on NGOs' activities from the approach of Lebanese non-profit organizations representatives can help researchers understand and explain its impact and provide insights for future practices that support at-risk populations, including refugees and the host community, which seeks to provide new contributions to the existing literature. Third, the results of the study can also contribute important practical recommendations for NGOs supporting refugees from Ukraine. Last, previous theoretical studies end up proposing strategies focusing only on COVID-19. These implications imply that further theoretical insights must be executed, and strategies need to be revised to include both COVID-19 and the needs of Syrian refugees to respond to the crisis and maintain NGO's continuity. A resource dependency theory can thus guide this research as it includes the risk of crisis and focuses on necessary resources for the organization's survival, emphasizing humanitarian activities undertaken during the Syrian refugee crisis and COVID-19.

Practical implications. Some recommendations are given to non-profit organizations, especially NGOs supporting refugees such as Syrian and recently Ukraine, to successfully manage current and future crises without changing their focus and goals.

Digitization. employing different technological tools to facilitate communication, reach beneficiaries, attract donors and improve awareness about the organization's image. For instance, NGOs could use email, social media messaging and websites for fundraising and building supporter engagement (Mikołajczak et al., 2022). Another example is the employment of a new telemedicine technology used during pandemic conditions, which has great potential to control the disease without geographic or location restrictions (Zhai et al., 2020). According to Herbert (2017), digitization enables NGOs to reduce labor costs, personalize the donation process, increase transparency and trust, focus on attracting the community to support the organization's ideas, build relations, virtualize electronic marketing, and decentralize their services (Herbert, 2017).

Strategic performance measurement. Non-profit organizations must prove that they are attaining their missions and goals efficiently and effectively for their constituencies (Verschuere and Suykens, 2020). Therefore, NGOs must evaluate their

performance to identify deficiencies and develop corrective plans for future crises.

Empowering communities. Due to the NGO's limited capacity to provide adequate services for refugees and the host community during a crisis, empowering the community would be essential since they support the NGO's response. Therefore, strengthened community resources and networks are necessary for a better response to the pandemic and related restraints and inspire a framework for the safety of refugees and host communities now and in the future, predominantly in circumstances where NGOs normally cover an outsized geographical region (Wilke et al., 2020).

Strong communication and coordination mechanisms. In this study, participants declared coordination between the government and NGOs; however, it was limited due to late governmental decisions and lack of information affecting the accessibility to the services. In this regard, schools, faith communities, and other social networks can become cores for spreading information and supplies, while NGOs can assess, monitor, and connect to community services. Hence, stakeholders can provide a complete spectrum of services for refugees and the host community (Wilke et al., 2020).

Mitigation plan. NGOs are prepared to face a crisis when they possess an action plan for vulnerable refugees and the host community. Forward-thinking and mitigation plans are essential, as they can prepare the team to be well-organized and work efficiently during a crisis response. As a result, NGOs should concentrate their efforts on planning and considering various scenarios that may occur in their regions (floods, displacement, conflicts). These plans should be established and developed with the participation of stakeholders from multiple sectors (health, economic, child protection, education, and private) representing their diversified perspectives (Wilke et al., 2020).

Resource dependency and resource-based view (RDT). NGO managers should make expectations to survive by identifying and responding to external constraints. This theory recognizes the effect of external factors on behavior within organizations, although constrained by their environment; managers can diminish environmental uncertainty and dependence (Maserat et al., 2020).

Organizational sustainability. Data revealed a need for more funding opportunities for NGOs; however, more than just financial support is required. NGOs are built for impact rather than financial stability (Masaoka et al., 2010). Hence, organizational sustainability can develop the NGO's reputation, increase labor relationships and assets, and decrease partners' concerns (Lee, 2012).

Training on disaster risk management. NGO employees and volunteers working in the humanitarian response crisis need DRR disaster risk reduction training. According to Kang'ethe and Manomano (2014), the level of skills and training determines competence levels and the organization's potential effectiveness and efficiency in the workplace.

Conclusion

COVID-19 impacted the NGO's human resources, financial resources and ability to offer assistance for the increased needs of the host community and Syrian refugees. Nonetheless, NGOs adopted several strategies to cope with the changes that occurred

due to the pandemic. They increased their communication efforts, reoriented their programs and activities, switched to virtual work and focused on the motivation and support of the staff.

Although NGOs somehow succeeded in their response due to their qualified team through training and workshops, directing aid and obtaining support from different stakeholders, increasing capital and projects and their role in front of the society and creating a crisis cell. However, they needed to be more timely in their response. They needed to be timelier in the time spent studying the local and regional context, risk analysis, absence of information, limited infrastructure, lack of resources and funds, and late governmental decisions and restrictions.

In light of the findings, those strategies need to be revised as they are concerned only with COVID-19, neglecting the needs of Syrian refugees and many other community social needs. So, NGOs in Lebanon still need to be ready to face several crises and be prepared generously simultaneously. Hence, this research's findings contribute to a better understanding of the effect of COVID-19 on NGOs' activities serving refugees and how these organizations can best assist this population in times of crisis. Including the refugee crisis and COVID-19 gives this study a particular advantage and novelty.

Limitations and implications for future research. The current study has several main limitations that could be useful for future research. First, as the crisis continues to extend, additional research is required to understand better its impact on the community and how NGOs can sustainably support it. Most participants were local NGOs, with 28 participants, whereas only twelve were international NGOs. Therefore, the findings may or may not apply to other organizational contexts or global non-governmental organizations. Future research should involve more international organizations with diverse perspectives applicable to the global humanitarian sector.

Moreover, the time required for collecting data and the difficulty scheduling meetings with NGO leaders due to government restrictions and lockdowns are also some of the limitations. Hence, a small number of face-to-face interviews were conducted, and a single analysis method was utilized. Multiple analysis methods, such as focus group discussion or observation, are recommended in the future. Additionally, the study's findings were limited to a single sector; future research may investigate the role of government or donors in response to humanitarian crises and pandemics facing Syrian refugees. Conclusively, we employed qualitative research, and our findings are contextual. Future research should conduct a mixed methodology with a larger sample size, focusing on Syrian refugees for more reliable results.

Data availability

The datasets produced during and analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Author contributions

All authors have contributed equally.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval

Approval was obtained from the ethics committee of Cyprus International University. The procedures employed in this study follow the tenets of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed consent

Consent was obtained verbally from participants.

Additional information

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