

Social Organizations' Embedding in Grid-Based Governance: A Resource Dependence Perspective on Pathways and Mechanisms

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing complexity of grassroots governance and diversified social demands, traditional grid-based governance faces challenges such as insufficient governance resources and limited capacity for social participation. As an important actor connecting the state and society, social organizations have become increasingly involved in grassroots governance. Based on resource dependence theory, this study explores the pathways and mechanisms of social organizations' embedding in grid-based governance. It argues that such embedding is a dynamic process driven by the interaction between governance demands and resource exchange. Specifically, social organizations achieve embedding through three interconnected processes: resource acquisition, relationship building, and functional embedding. Through providing human, professional, and social resources, social organizations complement the limitations of administrative governance, establish stable connections with grassroots governance systems, and expand governance functions in areas such as public service provision, information feedback, and governance assistance. This study provides a resource-based explanation of social organizations' participation in grid-based governance and offers theoretical implications for promoting multi-actor participation in grassroots governance.

KEYWORDS

Social Organizations; Grid-Based Governance; Grassroots Governance; Resource Dependence Theory.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Grassroots governance constitutes an essential foundation of the national governance system. With the continuous transformation of social structures, the objects, demands, and tasks of grassroots governance have become increasingly complex and diversified. The traditional governance model centered on governmental administrative systems has played an important role in maintaining social order and providing public services. However, in the face of growing governance demands, administrative forces alone are no longer sufficient to achieve comprehensive and effective responses to grassroots affairs.

Grid-based governance has emerged as a grassroots governance model under this context. By dividing governance units, clarifying governance responsibilities, and integrating information resources, grid-based governance promotes the transformation of grassroots governance from extensive management toward more refined governance. It enhances the capacity of local governments to identify problems and respond to social demands. In practice, grid-based governance has become an important institutional arrangement in China's urban grassroots governance.

However, as grid-based governance continues to extend toward the grassroots level, it has also encountered certain resource constraints. On the one hand, grassroots governance affairs have continued to expand ^[1], and grid workers have taken on increasingly diverse responsibilities, including information collection, policy dissemination, conflict identification, and public service provision. This has created tensions between limited administrative resources and growing governance demands. On the other hand, some governance subjects in contemporary society are characterized by high mobility and complexity, making it difficult for administrative systems alone to achieve effective coverage. Therefore, the involvement of social forces is increasingly needed to enhance governance responsiveness.

As important actors connecting the state and society, social organizations possess certain capacities in professional service provision, social mobilization, and resource integration. As an integral component of the national governance system, social organizations play an important role in innovating governance approaches, improving the quality of government public services, and strengthening the social security system ^[2]. In grassroots governance practices, the fundamental functions of social organizations include providing services, expressing demands, and regulating behaviors, making them an important bridge between citizens and governments ^[3]. Meanwhile, the relationship between government and society has gradually transformed, with an increasing number of social organizations emerging and playing more significant roles. The relationship between governmental organizations and community organizations has shifted from leadership and control toward guidance, coordination, and cooperation ^[4]. Therefore, how social organizations enter grid-based governance systems and how such participation develops into stable operational mechanisms have become important research questions.

Existing studies have provided extensive discussions on grid-based governance and the participation of social organizations in grassroots governance. However, there remains considerable room for further exploration regarding the relationship between the two. On the one hand, research on grid-based governance has mainly focused on institutional operation, technological applications, and administrative logic, while paying relatively limited attention to how external social actors enter and participate in grid systems. On the other hand, studies on social organizations' involvement in grassroots governance have largely emphasized their functional value, but insufficient attention has been given to how resource-based relationships are established between social organizations and grassroots governance systems.

Based on this, this study introduces resource dependence theory to address three questions: First, why does grassroots grid-based governance require the participation of social organizations? Second, how do social organizations become embedded in grid-based governance systems through resource-based relationships? Third, how do social organizations expand their governance functions after becoming embedded in grid-based governance? Through these analyses, this study seeks to reveal the resource logic underlying social organizations' participation in grassroots governance and provide a new analytical perspective for understanding the transformation of grid-based governance.

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Resource Dependence Theory was systematically developed by American scholars Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald R. Salancik in their 1978 book *The External Control of Organizations*. Emerging from organizational studies in the 1970s, the theory primarily focuses on the relationship between organizations and their external environments. It argues that organizations do not operate independently but are influenced by the distribution of critical resources in their external environments. Since no organization can possess all the resources required to achieve its goals, organizations need to establish connections with external actors in order to acquire resources and adapt to environmental changes.

Resource Dependence Theory emphasizes that inter-organizational relationships largely originate from the imbalance between resource demands and resource supplies. When different actors possess resources needed by each other, they tend to establish interdependent relationships through cooperation and exchange. Subsequently, this theory has been widely applied in the field of public administration to analyze cooperative relationships between governments and social organizations.

The participation of social organizations in grassroots governance also reflects a form of resource dependence. On the one hand, with the continuous expansion of grassroots governance tasks, governments and grid-based governance systems face shortages of human resources, professional capacity, and social mobilization resources. Therefore, they need to utilize the resource advantages of social organizations to enhance governance capacity. On the other hand, the development of social organizations also depends on the institutional space, organizational support, and governance platforms provided by governments. Therefore, the embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance is not a one-way process of entry, but rather an interactive process formed on the basis of resource complementarity.

Based on Resource Dependence Theory, this study argues that the embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance can be understood as three interconnected processes. First, resource acquisition refers to the process through which social organizations obtain opportunities for participation by providing resources required for grassroots governance. Second, relationship building refers to the establishment of stable connections between social organizations and grassroots governance actors, enabling social organizations to move from peripheral participation toward deeper integration into governance systems. Third, functional embedding refers to the further involvement of social organizations in specific governance activities, such as service provision, information feedback, and governance assistance, thereby expanding governance functions. Accordingly, this study develops an analytical framework of “resource acquisition–relationship building–functional embedding” to explain the pathways through which social organizations become embedded in grid-based governance.

3. PRACTICAL LOGIC OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS’ EMBEDDING IN GRID-BASED GOVERNANCE

The embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance is not a simple process of actor entry, but rather a dynamic process gradually formed through the interaction between grassroots governance demands for resources and the resource provision of social organizations. From a practical perspective, social organizations first obtain opportunities for governance participation through resource provision, then establish stable relationships with grassroots governance actors, and further achieve the expansion of governance functions.

3.1 Resource Acquisition: Obtaining Opportunities for Governance Participation through Resource Complementarity

The entry of social organizations into grid-based governance systems is primarily driven by the grassroots governance system’s demand for external resources. With the continuous increase of grassroots governance tasks, the functions undertaken by grid-based governance have gradually expanded from traditional information collection and problem identification to areas such as public service provision, conflict coordination, and social mobilization. In this process, relying solely on grassroots administrative forces is insufficient to fully address increasingly complex and diversified governance demands. Therefore, the inclusion of social forces has become necessary for supplementing governance resources.

Compared with traditional administrative systems, social organizations possess certain advantages in terms of resource types. First, social organizations can provide human resources ^[5]. Through the

participation of volunteers, social workers, and other service providers, social organizations can expand the human resource base of grassroots governance and alleviate personnel shortages in grid-based governance. Second, social organizations can provide professional resources. Some grassroots governance tasks involve specialized fields such as social services, psychological support, and services for vulnerable groups. The professional capacities accumulated by social organizations through long-term practice can provide important support for grassroots governance. Third, social organizations possess social connection resources. By maintaining relationships with specific groups, they can enhance the capacity of grassroots governance systems to obtain information and respond to social demands.

For social organizations, entering grid-based governance systems also involves meeting their own resource demands. The development of social organizations generally requires institutional support, operational space, and social recognition, while grassroots governance systems can provide platforms for their participation in public affairs. Therefore, a two-way relationship of resource dependence based on resource complementarity is formed between social organizations and grassroots governance systems. At this stage, social organizations do not directly enter grid-based governance as independent actors; rather, they first obtain participation opportunities by providing resources needed for grassroots governance. Resource provision thus becomes the starting point of social organizations' embedding in grid-based governance.

3.2 Relationship Building: Integrating into Governance Systems through Organizational Interaction

Resource acquisition provides the possibility for social organizations to enter grid-based governance, but resource provision alone cannot guarantee their sustained participation. To achieve genuine embedding into grid-based governance systems, social organizations need to establish stable organizational relationships with grassroots governance actors and transform temporary cooperation into continuous interaction. The relationship building between social organizations and grid-based governance systems is mainly reflected in two aspects.

On the one hand, social organizations need to establish institutionalized connections. Grassroots governance systems are characterized by relatively structured organizational arrangements and operational rules. Therefore, social organizations need to obtain institutional recognition through approaches such as project cooperation, service contracting, and grassroots collaboration. Institutionalized relationships clarify the scope, methods, and responsibilities of social organizations' participation, enabling them to move from temporary involvement toward stable participation. On the other hand, social organizations need to develop routine interaction relationships. Grid-based governance has strong grassroots characteristics, and its operation depends on information flows among communities, grid workers, and residents. Only by entering everyday governance networks and maintaining continuous communication with community workers, grid forces, and resident groups can social organizations accurately understand grassroots demands and effectively transform their resources into governance capacity.

Therefore, relationship building represents a critical stage in the transformation of social organizations from external resource providers into internal governance participants. Through this process, social organizations and grassroots governance actors develop interdependent relationships: grassroots governance systems rely on the supplementary resources provided by social organizations, while social organizations depend on the institutional space and organizational support offered by grassroots governance systems.

3.3 Functional Embedding: From Service Participation to Governance Function Expansion

After social organizations obtain participation opportunities and establish stable relationships, their degree of embedding in grid-based governance further deepens, which is reflected in the gradual expansion of their governance functions. The participation of social organizations in grid-based governance does not imply the replacement of governmental functions; rather, social organizations undertake certain supportive and complementary functions within the existing governance system.

First, social organizations can perform service provision functions. Some public service demands in grassroots governance are characterized by specialization and refinement. Social organizations can rely on their professional capacities to provide more targeted services for residents and improve the quality of grassroots public service provision ^[6]. Second, social organizations can perform information feedback functions. Due to their close connections with specific social groups, social organizations have advantages in identifying grassroots demands and collecting social information, making them important channels linking grassroots governance systems with social needs. Third, social organizations can perform governance assistance functions. In grassroots governance processes, social organizations can participate in conflict coordination, relationship adjustment, and community activity organization, thereby assisting governance actors in improving their problem-solving capacity.

Through functional embedding, social organizations gradually move beyond the limited role of service providers and become important complementary actors within grid-based governance systems. However, it should be emphasized that such functional expansion does not mean that social organizations replace governments in assuming governance responsibilities. Rather, it represents the effective supplementation of governance resources within a government-led governance framework.

4. MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS' EMBEDDING IN GRID-BASED GOVERNANCE

4.1 Resource Complementarity Mechanism: Alleviating Resource Constraints in Grassroots Governance

Resource complementarity constitutes the fundamental mechanism through which social organizations generate effects after embedding into grid-based governance. Although grid-based governance enhances grassroots governance capacity through the division of governance units and the decentralization of responsibilities, its operation remains constrained by limited administrative resources. With the continuous increase of grassroots governance tasks, traditional administrative forces alone are insufficient to effectively respond to diversified social demands. The participation of social organizations can alleviate this tension to some extent. The embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance represents a process of optimizing resource structures. By incorporating the complementary resources provided by social organizations, grid-based governance systems can partially overcome administrative resource shortages and enhance governance capacity.

First, social organizations can supplement the human resources required for grid-based governance. Grassroots grid governance involves a wide range of daily affairs, including information collection, policy communication, resident services, and problem coordination, all of which require sustained human investment. By mobilizing volunteers, social workers, and other social forces to participate in grassroots affairs, social organizations expand the range of governance participants and provide more flexible human support for grid-based governance. Particularly in governance areas requiring long-term services and continuous communication, social organizations can perform functions that administrative forces are difficult to replace.

Second, social organizations can provide professional resources required for grassroots governance. As grassroots governance becomes increasingly complex, some governance issues have exceeded the capacity of traditional administrative management and require professional approaches for effective resolution. Social organizations generally possess experience in areas such as social services, group communication, and resource linkage. By introducing professional knowledge and service capabilities into grid-based governance, they can improve the precision of grassroots governance responses.

Furthermore, social organizations can provide relational resources that connect governance systems with society. An important goal of grid-based governance is to identify and respond to public demands in a timely manner. However, information acquisition within administrative systems often relies on formal channels. Due to their long-term involvement in social services and relatively stable connections with resident groups, social organizations can help grassroots governance systems more accurately understand social needs and reduce distortions in information transmission.

4.2 Relationship Coordination Mechanism: Promoting Effective Connections among Governance Actors

Resource complementarity provides the foundation for social organizations' participation in grid-based governance; however, whether these resources can effectively generate governance outcomes depends on the establishment of stable relationships among different actors. The embedding process of social organizations into grid-based governance is also a process in which they continuously build connections with grassroots governments, community organizations, and resident groups. Through the establishment of stable interactive relationships, social organizations can further integrate into grassroots governance systems.

First, social organizations establish institutionalized connections with grassroots governance actors, transforming temporary participation into stable cooperation. Their involvement in grassroots governance usually relies on institutional arrangements, including project cooperation, service participation, and grassroots collaboration mechanisms. These institutionalized connections clarify the methods and scope of social organizations' participation, enabling them to enter the operational system of grid-based governance rather than remaining in a peripheral supportive position.

Second, social organizations strengthen connections with communities, grid workers, and residents through daily interactions. Grid-based governance has strong grassroots characteristics, and its effective operation depends not only on institutional arrangements but also on continuous information exchange and action coordination among governance actors. By participating in community affairs and carrying out service activities, social organizations can gradually integrate into grassroots governance networks and increase interaction with other actors.

Third, social organizations can coordinate relationships among different governance actors. In grassroots governance processes, information asymmetry and differences in demands may exist among governments, communities, residents, and market actors. Due to their relatively flexible organizational characteristics, social organizations can serve as communication intermediaries among different actors and promote effective matching between governance demands and governance resources.

4.3 Functional Expansion Mechanism: Enhancing Grid-Based Governance Capacity

The ultimate manifestation of social organizations' embedding in grid-based governance lies in the continuous expansion of their governance functions. Resource acquisition and relationship building provide the foundation for social organizations' participation, but their embedding can only generate governance effects when they undertake specific governance functions. The embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance does not represent a replacement of governmental functions;

rather, it realizes functional supplementation within a government-led governance system. Through functional expansion, social organizations promote the transformation of grid-based governance from a single administrative management model toward a governance model characterized by resource integration, service responsiveness, and multi-actor participation.

First, social organizations can extend the service functions of grid-based governance. Traditional grid-based governance has primarily emphasized problem identification, information reporting, and administrative handling, while the participation of social organizations can further strengthen the service-oriented nature of grassroots governance. By providing convenient services, social services, and group-oriented services, social organizations help transform grid-based governance from simple administrative management toward a service model that places greater emphasis on responding to social needs.

Second, social organizations can enhance the information feedback capacity of grid-based governance. Effective grassroots governance depends on an accurate understanding of social demands. Through daily services and social connections, social organizations can identify problems and needs emerging in grassroots society in a timely manner and provide relevant information to governance systems, thereby improving the problem identification and response capabilities of grid-based governance.

Third, social organizations can assist grassroots governance actors in addressing certain complex issues. In grassroots society, some conflicts and problems cannot be effectively resolved through administrative management alone and require communication, coordination, and relationship adjustment. By participating in these processes, social organizations can utilize their social connection advantages to assist in conflict coordination and resident communication, thereby enhancing the flexibility of grassroots governance.

5. SUMMARY

The participation of social organizations in grid-based governance represents an innovative approach to grassroots governance in response to resource constraints and increasing governance complexity. Based on Resource Dependence Theory, this study analyzes the pathways and mechanisms through which social organizations become embedded in grid-based governance. The study argues that the embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance is not merely driven by administrative promotion, but gradually develops through the interaction between the resource demands of grassroots governance systems and the resource provision of social organizations.

From the perspective of implementation pathways, the embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance follows a process of “resource acquisition–relationship building–functional embedding.” First, social organizations obtain opportunities to participate in grassroots governance by providing human resources, professional resources, and social connection resources. Second, through establishing institutionalized and organizational connections with grassroots governance actors, social organizations transform from external participants into integrated actors within governance systems. Finally, by participating in service provision, information feedback, and governance assistance, social organizations achieve the expansion of governance functions. Regarding the mechanisms through which embedding occurs, social organizations mainly contribute to grid-based governance through resource complementarity, relationship coordination, and functional expansion. On the one hand, social organizations can compensate for resource shortages in grassroots governance and optimize the allocation of governance resources. On the other hand, they can facilitate information exchange and relationship connections among different governance actors, thereby enhancing the responsiveness of grassroots governance systems.

The embedding of social organizations into grid-based governance also faces several practical challenges. For example, differences exist in the development capacities of social organizations, and

the stability and sustainability of resource provision require further improvement. Meanwhile, the division of responsibilities and rights between governments and social organizations needs to be clarified to prevent social organizations' participation from becoming merely symbolic. Therefore, future grassroots governance practices should further improve institutional support mechanisms for social organizations' participation, enhance their professional capacities, and promote a transition from project-based and temporary participation toward regularized and institutionalized involvement.

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