



Capacity Building in the Arab Nonprofit Sector: A Scoping Review and Preliminary Bibliometric Insights

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Abstract

Arab countries are pursuing ambitious development agendas, modernizing while preserving cultural identities. Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) play vital roles across social, economic, and environmental sectors, yet research on capacity building remains limited. Guided by PRISMA-ScR, this bilingual review (English and Arabic) retrieved 219 records (2012–2023), of which only 20 met the inclusion criteria. A small-scale bibliometric analysis identified key concepts involving institutional development, the NPO watchdog function, and Islamic social finance. This review contributes to global capacity-building theories by unveiling region-specific factors, such as localized volunteering and religious endowments, that both enrich and challenge conventional NPO models. While highlighting pressing gaps for empirical and conceptual work, it offers actionable insights for policymakers and nonprofit leaders seeking to strengthen Arab NPO interventions. Ultimately, it reframes capacity-building dialogues, revealing how Arab NPOs can advance broader development agendas. The data sets generated and/or analyzed during this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

Keywords

Arab nonprofit sector, capacity building, NPO watchdog function, institutional development, Islamic social finance, public value creation

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Introduction

The Arab world represents a complex tapestry of traditions, dynamism, youthfulness, and a strong drive for cultural identity, underpinned by aspirations to assert a rightful place in the new multipolar geopolitical order. Most countries in the region have introduced ambitious developmental plans, often termed “Visions 2030,” that rest on four key pillars: human, social, economic, and environmental development. These agendas aim to modernize while preserving cultural heritage and improving citizens’ quality of life. Dissatisfaction with neoliberal models promoted by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (WB) has further catalyzed such strategic planning. As Momani and Lanz (2014, p. 41) remark, “pre-2011 the IMF’s prescriptions were not particularly concerned with social outcomes. Moreover, they were equally unconcerned with human capital development and aggregate demand management.”

The transition from tradition to modernity is also evident in the rapid evolution of the third sector, with nonprofit organizations (NPOs) assuming critical roles in both humanitarian and political spheres (Ben Néfissa, 2005). For instance, there are more than 6,900 NPOs in Saudi Arabia, 30,000 in Egypt, 5,000 in Lebanon, 1,197 in Jordan, and 450 in Bahrain. Although many NPOs focus on social work and charity, they have increasingly expanded to address pressing issues related to human rights, democracy, and equality. Abu-Ismail et al. (2015) highlight five core challenges confronting the region—among them, institutional reform, social justice, human development, Arab cultural heritage preservation, and environmental sustainability—while noting that “development depends on institutional and governance reform” (p. 8).

Despite the critical role that NPOs play in helping governments and communities tackle these multifaceted challenges, the literature offers limited insights into the specific strategies, outcomes, and challenges of capacity building across Arab contexts. While some research has examined NPO capacity building in general (Anheier, 2014; Cornforth & Mordaunt, 2011) or in Middle Eastern settings (Ben Néfissa, 2005; Hvidt, 2019), much of this work remains either narrowly focused on single-country case studies or lacks a systematic synthesis of diverse Arab contexts. Our article goes beyond these earlier efforts by conducting a comprehensive scoping review that consolidates empirical and conceptual research from multiple Arab nations, illuminating how NPOs navigate capacity-building processes in complex socio-political and cultural environments. By integrating both English and Arabic sources and employing a brief bibliometric analysis, this study captures broader regional trends and identifies underexplored areas, thereby offering novel, policy-relevant insights into the interplay between Islamic social finance, governance reforms, and NPO independence. Building capacity is not simply a technocratic managerial process, but one that is rooted in societal values, interpretations, and policy visions, and cuts across the interests of various parties. Thus, an examination of this process across a group of Arab countries promises to reveal the core meaning of this concept and its underlying assumptions. In doing so, we position this review as an essential platform for future, more targeted inquiries seeking to address persistent gaps in understanding how NPOs effectively build and sustain capacity across the Arab world.

Many analysts agree that improving the institutional dimension of NPOs, encompassing governance, administrative capacity, and finance, is critical (Anheier, 2014; Hvidt, 2019). Institutions, in turn, provide essential support for social services, education, and humanitarian activities (Jreisat, 2012). Laallam et al. (2020) explicitly highlight the need for administrative, legal, and financial reforms in the Awagf institution, which represents the backbone of the Islamic charitable system and is crucial for NPO funding. Yet, questions remain about how NPOs develop robust organizational and operational capacities, adapt to regional complexities, and leverage Islamic social finance in ways that foster both efficacy and independence.

Understanding how NPOs build capacity in diverse Arab contexts offers policy-relevant evidence for stakeholders committed to advancing social and economic development. This study thus contributes to both academic scholarship and practical interventions in two main ways by (a) clarifying the capacity construct and (b) identifying the main assumptions behind capacity building. Post et al. (2020) identified these two ways as major contributors to theory building from reviews. Related aims of the study include (a) mapping current knowledge about NPO capacity building in Arab countries, (b) identifying underexplored areas, and (c) proposing pathways for future empirical work. The study advances the network governance pathway, focusing on the interplay between formal and informal institutions in capacity building. Accordingly, this review seeks to answer two core questions corresponding to the capacity construct and its main assumptions, respectively:

1. How has capacity building within Arab countries been investigated in the literature?
2. What do the topic areas of capacity building studied in the Arab context reveal about the sector's role?

By answering these two questions, that study will also generate lessons for NPOs operating in Arab countries.

To address these questions, we conducted a scoping review, an established method for synthesizing heterogeneous evidence and clarifying the extent and nature of a research area (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). In addition, we employed a brief bibliometric analysis to explore potential relationships and emerging clusters within the limited corpus. While the bibliometric portion remains indicative rather than definitive, it provides preliminary insights into how NPO capacity building has been investigated across varied Arab contexts. This article thus aims to advance understanding of NPO capacity building in the Arab world by illuminating key concepts, identifying under-researched topics, and offering a foundation for more targeted empirical inquiries.

Capacity Building: Clarifying the Concept (Part I)

Capacity has long been recognized as a multifaceted, evolving concept. According to Bergeron et al. (2017), at least 28 theories, models, and frameworks have been employed by researchers to explain it. Broadly, capacity can be understood as the ability of an individual, organization, or community to achieve specific goals (De Vita

et al., 2001; Gazley & Christensen, 2008; Wigboldus et al., 2010). This notion of capacity encompasses both processes and structures (Millar & Doherty, 2016) and includes formal goals and evaluation mechanisms (Sowa et al., 2004).

Different scholars propose varied dimensions of capacity. Eade (2007) contends that capacity might be intellectual, organizational, social, political, cultural, representational, material, technical, practical, or financial, or a shifting combination of all of these. In contrast, Hall et al. (2003) present a multidimensional model emphasizing financial, human, and structural capacity. Taken together, these perspectives highlight four essential capacity dimensions: human resources (e.g., motivation, knowledge, and experience), external relationships (e.g., trust or domain-specific networks), organizational infrastructure (culture, research, and technology), and financial resources (e.g., resources, assets, and cost of labor).

Sen's (1999) view of capacity in the context of development centers on functioning and capabilities. Functioning describes what individuals or groups value doing and becoming, reflecting a potential for flourishing, while capabilities refer to the real opportunities that allow them to achieve those goals, rather than simply wishing for them. As a result, Sen's interpretation adds a "flourishing" component to the structural, process-oriented, qualitative, and quantitative elements of capacity, underscoring the transformative potential that capacity can unlock.

Kacou et al. (2022) conducted a 50-year review and concluded that the concept of capacity building often lacks strong conceptual or theoretical anchors. They propose a framework of "new pragmatism," grounded in three key elements: conducting diagnostics before prescribing interventions, ensuring capacity building is rooted contexts, and selecting appropriate policy tools for those contexts.

Capacity building, therefore, is not a fixed attribute, but one that continuously adapts to organizational and environmental changes. As Eade (2007) notes, "Capacity building is not a 'thing' or a commodity that can be reduced to a set of ingredients for a universal recipe prescribing 'how to do it'" (p. 632). Similarly, Honadle (1981) clarifies that capacity refers to the means of performing, whereas capacity building entails deliberate efforts to enhance these means. Hence, building capacity involves intention, agency, and the strategic use of policy instruments.

In an Islamic context, capacity building is highly regarded as part of personal development, community empowerment, and societal well-being. The Arabic term for capacity, "قدر" (qudrah), stems from the root word "قدر" (qadr), which means "to measure" or "to determine," conveying the notion of capability, power, or ability. Islamic teachings emphasize employing one's resources to benefit society, uphold justice, and alleviate inequities. This aligns with the idea of capacity building, where individuals and communities work on developing their abilities and potential to create positive change and contribute meaningfully to the world around them. Thus, capacity building in Islam represents a process inherent in all humans and systems and not simply a rational organizational activity as suggested by Honadle (1981).

This Islamic framing can be further deepened by examining long-standing traditions of Muslim philanthropic activity, especially Zakat and Sadaqah, which are central to how capacity is mobilized and expanded within communities. Zakat, an obligatory charitable giving mechanism, institutionalizes redistribution and fosters

economic justice, creating a moral and financial infrastructure that supports social welfare and organizational resilience. Sadaqah, a voluntary form of charity, complements Zakat by enabling responsive and context-sensitive support systems. Together, they offer a culturally rooted interpretation of capacity building—not only merely as a managerial function but also as a religious duty embedded in ethical conduct, communal obligation, and social transformation. These practices effectively frame capacity not only as institutional robustness but also as a reflection of spiritual accountability and societal cohesion (Laallam et al., 2020; United Nations, 2021).

The Quran and Hadith consistently stress the importance of knowledge and skill acquisition that benefits oneself and others. One Quranic verse states, “Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” (Qur'an 39:9), thus highlighting the value of knowledge and learning. A related Hadith affirms, “Verily, Allah loves that when any of you does something, he does it in the most excellent manner,” (al-Bayhaqi, Shu'ab al-Iman, no. 5313), suggesting a continual striving for proficiency and service. Furthermore, the practice of Zakat (obligatory almsgiving) and Sadaqah (voluntary charity) embodies Islam's commitment to supporting those in need, reducing poverty, and establishing a more equitable social order. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said, “Charity does not in any way decrease the wealth and the servant who forgives, Allah adds to his respect; and the one who shows humility, Allah elevates him in the estimation (of the people).” (Sahih Muslim, no. 2588).

From this perspective, capacity building in Islam involves developing multifaceted capabilities, knowledge, skills, ethics, and leadership while meeting both spiritual and social responsibilities. It fosters personal advancement and communal progress, reflecting a more holistic understanding of capacity than purely rational or organizational approaches might suggest. The interpretation of capacity building in the Arab context thus offers a new vista on the concept, which differs from its pragmatic focus favored in the West, concerned with resource utilization, institution building, effectiveness, and best practices (Kacou et al., 2022). Of the 72 studies reviewed by Kacou and colleagues, only one article was published with the first author affiliated with an organization based in the South.

The present scoping review adopts Zinke's (2006) framework, which regards capacity as “an emergent combination of attributes, assets, capabilities and relationships that enables an organization and its members to perform, develop and self-renew and to create developmental value” (p. 4). This framework provides a useful lens by presenting capacity as (a) a system-wide and collective phenomenon; (b) an outcome of oNPO-ing interactions between internal and external factors; (c) a process focused on generating public value (central to NPO missions); and (d) a set of five core capabilities. It is also aligned with Islamic interpretation of capacity as a systems phenomenon inherent in all human systems. Aligned with Sen's (1999) emphasis on “functioning and capabilities,” it clarifies what “the ability to do something” entails in practice.

The first core capability is to act, involving an organization's identity and strategic focus. The second is to generate development results, reflecting an organization's ability to deliver meaningful services. The third is to relate, which concerns forging partnerships and securing resources and influence. The fourth is to adapt and self-renew, emphasizing change management and innovation in response to shifting environments. Finally, the

capability to achieve coherence allows an organization to specialize effectively while distinguishing itself from other entities in the same field.

This perspective on capacity building resonates with both the Islamic interpretation, rooted in continual self-improvement, and Jreisat's (2012) analysis of capacity building in Arab contexts. Because capacity depends on an organization's evolving interactions, it represents a potential state that can fluctuate significantly, even within the same institution, over time.

Method

A scoping review was deemed the most appropriate method for this study because existing research on NPO capacity building in Arab countries appears fragmented and sparse. While systematic reviews typically focus on a narrower set of well-defined research questions, and integrative reviews synthesize diverse evidence to form new frameworks, our preliminary exploration suggested that the literature on NPO capacity building in Arab contexts was neither extensive nor methodologically homogeneous enough to warrant a fully systematic or integrative review (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; Munn et al., 2018). By contrast, scoping reviews allow for a broad mapping of current knowledge, identifying key concepts, evidence types, and research gaps in fields with limited or emerging scholarship (Levac et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2021). Scoping reviews account for a diversity of relevant literature and methodologies, including theoretical and narrative reviews, gray literature, as well as both qualitative and quantitative research (Munn et al., 2022). Since NPO capacity building in Arab contexts remains under-researched, a scoping review can capture the full range of relevant studies, including exploratory and preliminary ones, while laying the groundwork for future systematic or integrative investigations.

We followed the five-stage process proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), which is widely recognized for its structured approach to formulating a research question, identifying relevant studies, selecting studies, charting the data, and collating, summarizing, and reporting the results. In keeping with best practices, we also adhered to the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (Tricco et al., 2018), ensuring transparency in our methodological reporting.

Identification of the Research Question

According to Arksey and O'Malley (2005), the starting point of any scoping review is a clear research question. While previous work has explored capacity building in community initiatives (Liberato et al., 2011), health care (Bergeron et al., 2017; Crisp et al., 2000), youth sport (Jones et al., 2020), and charities (Cornforth & Mordaunt, 2011), relatively little is known about how NPO capacity building is addressed in Arab contexts. We, therefore, formulated two questions:

1. How has capacity building within Arab countries been investigated in the literature?
2. What do the topic areas of capacity building studied in the Arab context reveal about the sector's role?

Determination of Relevant Studies: Search Strategy

A comprehensive search strategy aimed to include peer-reviewed journal articles with a focus on all forms of study designs (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods) and types of studies (i.e., conceptual and empirical). Gray literature was also included to enhance the comprehensiveness of the review. To capture a broad scope, the geographical focus was Arab countries, and the language criteria allowed for both English and Arabic publications (2012–2023) that explicitly examined capacity-building interpretations.

We employed three primary concepts, “capacity building,” “nonprofit sector,” and “Arab countries,” along with related synonyms in both languages. Sample queries included “nonprofit AND Arab AND capacity,” “third sector AND capacity AND Middle East,” “nongovernmental AND Arab AND capacity,” “voluntary AND capacity AND Arab,” and “Nonprofit AND MENA AND capacity.”

A total of 14 online databases were searched. Nine of these were English-language databases: Web of Science, SCOPUS, ProQuest Central, Wiley Online Library, JSTOR, Sport Discus, EBSCO Science Reference Center, Academic Search Ultimate (EBSCO), and Google Scholar, whereas five were Arabic databases: Al Manhal, Arab Journals Platform, E-Marefa Database, Hindawi Foundation for Education and Culture, Dar Almandumah, and Arab World Research Source (EBSCO).

Screening and Selection

Publications retrieved from all databases were imported into Covidence, a systematic review management software. After removing 64 duplicates from an initial 198¹ records, we screened titles and abstracts, excluding 85 articles that were irrelevant. This left 49 articles for full-text review. Of these, 17 met the inclusion criteria (six quantitative, three mixed-methods, and eight qualitative). Meanwhile, the Arabic database search generated 21 articles; two were duplicates, and another eight were excluded for not meeting the criteria upon title and abstract screening. Of the remaining 11, three were included (all quantitative). Consequently, 20 studies formed the final corpus.

Each stage of screening was conducted independently by three researchers who engaged in rotational discussions to resolve disagreements and reach consensus. Figure 1 illustrates the selection process, while Table 1 summarizes the final studies (capacity type, country, population examined).

Charting the Data

Following Arksey and O’Malley (2005), charting served as a structured method for organizing and interpreting key information. We developed a data extraction template in Covidence to record: the country of study, research aims, research design and methods, participants, population description, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and funding information (where available). A team of four researchers performed data extraction, but only two were responsible for quality assessment. Although formal quality appraisal is not mandatory for scoping reviews, since their general purpose is to

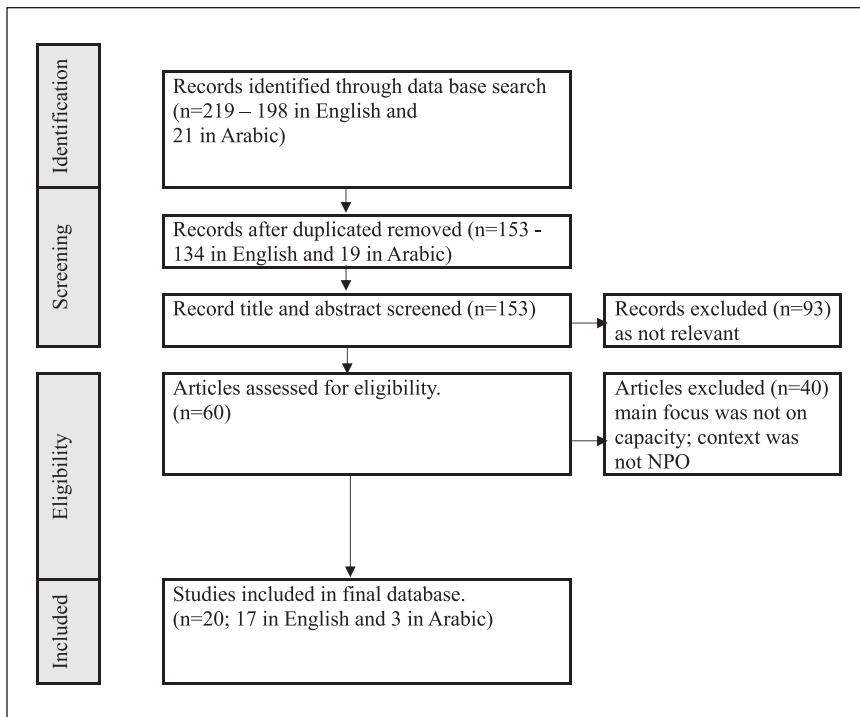


Figure 1. The Process of Selecting Studies.

identify and map the available evidence, it was reasonable to ensure that each study met basic methodological standards. This is not unusual, as for example, Tricco et al. (2016) review of 516 scoping reviews reported that quality appraisal was conducted in 71 studies (14%). We integrated the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) into Covidence for this purpose. The MMAT assesses the quality of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies by focusing on five core quality criteria pertinent to each of the following five categories of study designs: (a) qualitative, (b) randomized controlled, (c) nonrandomized, (d) quantitative descriptive, and (e) mixed methods. The use of the MMAT tool resulted in excluding two studies from the full-text review stage because they did not articulate a clear methodology. Throughout the data extraction phase, continuous discussions helped maintain a consistent approach and resolve any ambiguities.

In addition to the scoping review, we conducted a preliminary bibliometric analysis using VOSviewer to visualize keyword co-occurrences (co-word analysis). This technique illustrates how frequently certain terms appear together in a corpus, thereby helping to outline the knowledge structure of NPO capacity-building research. Given our small data set of 20 studies, these bibliometric findings should be viewed as exploratory rather than definitive. Figure 2 presents a network map comprising four main clusters

Table 1. Overview of Selected Studies.

| Author/journal | Country | Setting | Study type | Population | Capacity type |
|--|-------------------------------|---|---------------|---|-------------------------------|
| Herrold and AbouAssi (2023) Public Administration and Development | Egypt, Lebanon, and Palestine | NPOs | Qualitative | 23 representatives of NPOs, public agencies, and experts in the three countries | Democracy building |
| Salih and Dolah (2022) Measuring Business Excellence | Saudi Arabia | Local micro NPOs | Quantitative | 696 NPO organizations | Organizational |
| Abu-Serdanah et al. (2022) Corporate Governance and Organizational Behavior Review | Jordan | Local NPOs | Mixed-methods | 69 local NPOs | Organizational |
| Alawi et al. (2022) Journal of Public Affairs | Bahrain | Local NPOs | Qualitative | 105 NPO representatives | Human resource |
| Alhajjai and Al Nabulsi (2022) Social Sciences | Jordan | Community volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic | Quantitative | 121 volunteers in a Jordanian community | Volunteer and community |
| United Nations (2021) https://shorturl.at/tEHV8 | Saudi Arabia | Islamic endowments/nonprofit institution | Qualitative | SDG-Aligned Awqaf, 47,696 institutions | Sustainable financing |
| AlKhalifa and Farelo (2021) International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics | Bahrain, Kuwait and UAE | Arab Women football community | Qualitative | 265 social media posts for 3 organizations in Bahrain, Kuwait and UAE | Community and organizational |
| Kassem et al. (2021) <i>PLoS ONE</i> | Saudi Arabia | NPOs engaged in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) | Quantitative | 184 NPOs in six regions of Saudi Arabia | Organizational |
| Skandran et al. (2021) Qualitative market research | Tunisia | NPOs in the cities of Tunis and Sousse | Qualitative | 32 NPOs members in two main economic and touristic cities 11 women and 21 men | Organizational |
| Al-Madani and Al-Tawargi (2020) Majalat Bihüth (in Arabic) | Libya | Al-Yusr Foundation for Charitable Works Environmental NPOs | Quantitative | 30 members of the displaced families | Organizational |
| AbouAssi and Bies (2018) Public Management Review | Lebanon | | Quantitative | 98 NPO environmental organizations | Financial and self-regulation |

Table 1. (continued)

| Author/journal | Country | Setting | Study type | Population | Capacity type |
|--|--------------|--|---------------|--|---|
| Herrold (2018) Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly | Egypt | Nonprofit and voluntary sector | Qualitative | Leaders of 11 distinct private foundations and 4 leaders of two distinct community foundations | Organizational |
| Jiang et al. (2018) International society for third sector research | Saudi Arabia | Local NPOs | Quantitative | 280 volunteers, aged between 19 and 25 | Individual and societal |
| Strichman et al. (2018) International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations | Palestine | Arab shared society organizations | Qualitative | 20 Nonprofits Arab-Jewish organizations | Organizational |
| AbouAssi et al. (2017) Nonprofit Management and Leadership | Lebanon | Environmental NPOs | Quantitative | 153 environmental NPOs | Financial |
| Kincaid (2017) Digest of Middle East Studies | Tunisia | Community's social and political transformation postrevolution | Qualitative | 16 Tunisians' youth aged 19 to 35 | Individual capacity and leadership skills |
| Ghinali et al. (2014) Arab Journal of Gastroenterology | Egypt | Healthcare research institute | Mixed-methods | Theodor Bilharz Research Institute | Organizational |
| Ashtieh (2013) Majallat Jāmi'at Al-Quds Al-Maftūha lil-Abhāth wa Al-Dirāsāt (in Arabic) United Nations (2013) https://shorturl.at/oBOT | Palestine | Voluntary social work within Palestinian society | Quantitative | 140 volunteers from civil society organizations | Organizational and volunteer's capacity |
| Ezz El-Arab (2012) Shū'ūn Ijtima'iyya (in Arabic) | Yemen | Public and civil society organizations | Mixed-methods | 30 public and civil society organizations | Well-being of Yemen community |
| | | The Faculty of Arts, Tanta University | Quantitative | 200 undergraduate students | Social awareness of volunteers |

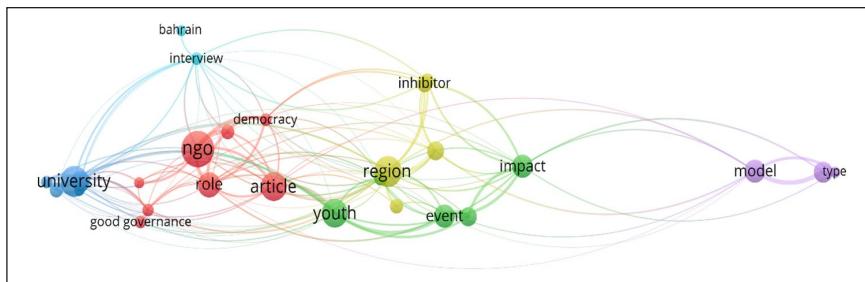


Figure 2. Knowledge Structure of Arab NPO Capacity Building Field (Word Co-Occurrence).

(red, green, blue, and yellow), each representing groups of closely related keywords. In this map, each node represents a concept. The distance between nodes indicates how closely related those concepts are, and the size of each node reflects how frequently the keyword appears in the literature. In the red cluster, NPOs appear with terms related to their societal role and the concept of “governance,” highlighting the institutional dimension of NPO operations. The green cluster brings together keywords on youth, relevant events, and the impact of those events on individual and organizational capacity building. The yellow cluster depicts the broader regional context, including various constraints faced by NPOs. Finally, the blue cluster centers on universities’ role in shaping research related to youth, NPOs, and governance.

These clusters provide an initial snapshot of thematic relationships in the existing literature, but the small number of studies warrants caution in interpreting the results. Further research involving a wider range of publications would help to validate or refine these preliminary insights.

Collating, Summarizing, and Reporting the Results

The studies included in this review were published in 18 different journals, including two Arab journals, which highlight the broad relevance of the capacity concept across disciplines and its often-contested interpretations. These journals span fields such as public administration, development studies, health care (e.g., *Arab Journal of Gastroenterology*), and environmental science, suggesting that capacity building is being investigated across varied disciplinary lenses. The number of journals is also indicative of the lack of a single outlet “championing” this topic, as well as a critical mass of scholars working in this field and publishing regularly. The research spanned 10 countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Ethiopia, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia, plus one study analyzing social media data from the entire region. The analysis illustrates a map of NPO capacity-building research in the Arab world, organized by (a) capacity issues, (b) research context, (c) capacity type, and (d) capability type, and how these dimensions interrelate (Figure 3). It was conducted by

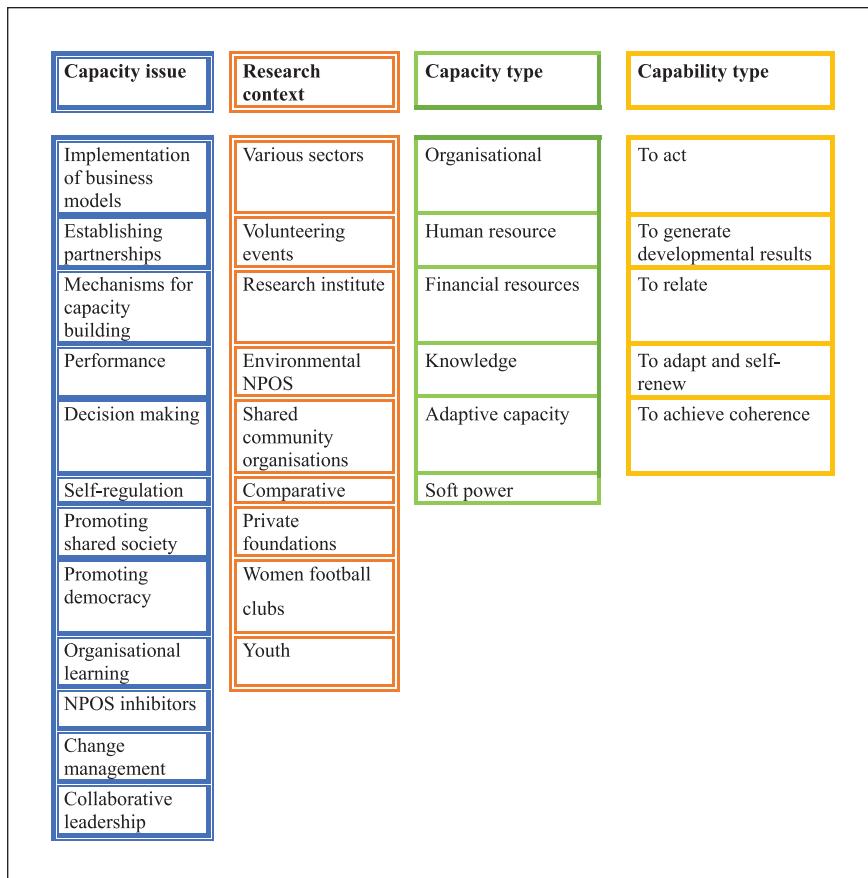


Figure 3. Map of NPOs' Capacity Building Literature in the Arab World.

combining keyword co-occurrence with the identification of patterns and their meaning across contexts, as addressed by different studies. The data analysis process consisted of deductively organizing the data, followed by inductively identifying emerging themes, patterns, and combining deductive and inductive analyses with theoretical propositions (Bingham, 2023). This mapping exercise allows for clarification of the construct and key assumptions behind capacity building.

Capacity Issues

The reviewed studies addressed a broad range of capacity issues linked to NPOs' processes (such as decision-making, implementation, and partnership-building) and structures (e.g., governance frameworks). In Egypt's private foundations, a quantitative capacity dimension emerged, reflecting formal goal setting and performance

targets. By contrast, only limited evidence surfaced for qualitative aspects of capacity (i.e., evaluating goal achievement and self-assessment) in a research institute (Ghinolfi et al., 2014). These findings spanned three levels of capacity building: the individual level (e.g., enhancing volunteer motivation), the organizational level (e.g., identifying inhibitors to NPO capacity), and the nation-state level (e.g., promoting a shared society). In their totality, they underscore the evolving and multifaceted nature of capacity building in Arab NPOs, where both quantitative goals and qualitative processes shape organizational effectiveness.

Research Context

Of the studies included in this review, 21 (91%) were empirical and two (9%) were conceptual, with the conceptual works selected for their analytical depth. Their research contexts ranged from environmental organizations and research institutes to private foundations and football clubs, underscoring NPOs' contributions to complex social, political, and economic issues. This diversity is reflected in the classification of nonprofit establishments in Saudi Arabia (King Khalid Foundation, 2021), which lists 10 categories of NPO: culture and entertainment (2.69%), education and research (1.55%), health (5.45%), social services (37%), environment (0.98%), development and housing (18.36%), civil rights (1.76%), charity (6.37%), Da'wa and guidance/religious education (22.8%), and scientific and professional (2.98%). The distribution of NPOs within Saudi Arabia confirms the growing diversification of the third sector in the region, which has gradually begun to incorporate political concerns such as environmental advocacy and civil rights. Moreover, some NPOs operate across multiple categories, highlighting how capacity building can be simultaneously relevant to social, economic, and political spheres.

Capacity Type (i.e., Construct Clarification—Part 2)

The review identified six distinct types of organizational capacity: organizational, human resource, financial resource, knowledge, adaptive capacity, and soft power. This range of capacities aligns with the Islamic interpretation and Zinke's (2006, p. 4) definition of capacity as "*an emergent combination of attributes, assets, capabilities and relationships.*" For example, Herrold (2018) showed how, following the 2011 political uprising, Egypt's community foundations took on democratic reform by striving for political, financial, and civic independence, often adopting an oppositional stance toward government. This required improving assets and capabilities to engage both existing and prospective members and to forge new partnerships. In doing so, these foundations sought to create developmental value, consistent with the capacity definition adopted by this study. This intentional process was driven by organizational agency and the use of policy tools to realize strategic objectives. In contrast, developments in the Arab sport sector, as noted by Taylor et al. (2023), displayed a more top-down emphasis on nation branding and soft power rather than a nuanced microlevel approach to power dynamics.

Two forms of capacity building warrant special attention. The first is adaptive capacity, illustrated by shared Jewish–Arab organizations (Strichman et al., 2018). These organizations exhibited key adaptive traits such as a shared vision, openness, inclusiveness, system thinking, social capital, and external networking. They often disrupted political norms and navigated complex external and internal environments, confirming the systems’ thinking perspective that views capacity building as an emergent combination of various attributes and relationships.

The second form, soft power, traditionally lies outside standard capacity definitions but has gained relevance. AlKhalifa and Farello (2021) investigated how Arab women’s football leverages soft power, defined as achieving goals through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Here, the game of football and the players’ skills served as core attractions. The authors identified mechanisms, including formal ties, campaigns, community engagement, and technical showcases, through which women’s football clubs attained both domestic and international legitimacy. Although their overarching aim was to secure the legitimacy of women’s football in the region, they achieved it through four targeted capabilities. The following section expands on NPO-specific capabilities in more detail.

Capabilities

Zinke (2006) identifies five core capabilities that shape the overall capacity of NPOs and broader systems: (a) the capability to act, (b) the capability to generate development results, (c) the capability to relate, (d) the capability to adapt and self-renew, and (e) the capability to achieve coherence. The studies reviewed in this article provide varied evidence for how these capabilities manifest in Arab NPOs. In one example, AbouAssi and Bies (2018) examined a Lebanese NPO and found that a certain level of isomorphism, specifically through professionalization, had a positive impact on the organization’s ability to self-regulate. Interestingly, mimetic isomorphism, or adopting “best practices” from the literature, did not prove equally beneficial in that setting. These findings underscore the nuanced ways NPOs balance external influences with internal goals when developing capacity.

Herrold and AbouAssi (2023) further illustrate the five core capabilities in their study of 23 Egyptian, Lebanese, and Palestinian NPOs focused on democracy. They identified organizational readiness (i.e., capability to act), organizational governance (i.e., capability to adapt and self-renew), nature of service provided (i.e., capability to generate development results), collaboration (i.e., capability to relate), and donor risk appetite (i.e., capability to achieve coherence) as the principal elements influencing these NPOs. Collectively, these insights highlight how context-specific factors, such as regional politics and donor expectations, interact with each of the five capabilities to shape NPO capacity in Arab contexts.

Relationship Between the Different Dimensions of Capacity

The range of capacity topics identified demonstrates the complex challenges NPOs face in Arab countries. Most issues revolve around policy, governance, and operational

management aspects of NPOs. Establishing partnerships, improving decision-making, implementing new business models, and leading organizational changes demand well-defined policies, sound governance structures, and an appropriate level of organizational capacity (i.e., knowledge and skills). According to Anheier (2014), the international classification of NPOs divides these entities into 12 groups. The NPOs examined belong to Groups 1 (sport), 2 (education and research), 5 (environment), and 7 (law, advocacy, and politics). No data was found for NPOs in Groups 3 (health), 4 (social services), 6 (development and housing), 8 (philanthropic), 9 (international), 10 (religious), 11 (business and professional unions), or 12 (unidentified). Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that further research into these underrepresented NPO groups could reinforce or broaden the capacity issues identified here and possibly uncover new ones.

Despite this limited range of contexts, the review revealed six main types of capacity building: organizational, human resources, financial resources, knowledge, adaptive, and soft power. These concern both processes (e.g., business model implementation and decision-making) and structures (e.g., partnerships and learning mechanisms) in line with Millar and Doherty's (2016) aspects of NPOs' work. The abovementioned capacity types are also conducive to the outcome dimension promoted by Sen (1999) because building some of them had as an explicit goal the creation of opportunities for the flourishing of people, particularly in the context of displaced families, divided communities, and volunteering (Al-Madani & Al-Tawargi, 2020).

The five core capabilities that define "the ability to do something" (Zinke, 2006) also emerged from the sample. Arab NPOs displayed the capability to act, as seen in efforts to tackle pressing social issues like self-regulation (AbouAssi & Bies, 2018) and family displacement (Al-Madani & Al-Tawargi, 2020). Herrold and AbouAssi (2023) show that NPOs in Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt can generate development results through service and output improvements tied to broader democratic reforms. NPOs also exhibited the capability to relate, exemplified by forging public–private partnerships (Kassem et al., 2021). Further evidence of adapting and self-renewing capabilities emerged among NPOs in Jordan, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia (Salih & Dolah, 2022; Strichman et al., 2018). Although limited, some Egyptian community and private foundations aspired to achieve coherence by aligning leadership changes with their core values and mission statements.

These findings suggest that while NPOs in the region navigate a narrow set of organizational contexts, they still demonstrate a diverse range of capacities and capabilities, indicating an evolving and context-dependent approach to capacity building.

Assumptions in Capacity Building

Assumptions about how capacity building might be understood in the context of NPO are underlying elements of any theory about this phenomenon. To that end, this scoping review espouses and analyzes the assumptions made in the selected studies and then reflects on how the assumptions link to different theoretical views and research approaches. Five interrelated core assumptions were identified that explain capacity building within NPOs across the Arab region, including: (a) the essence of NPO, (b) polity, (c) processes, (d) cultural conditioning, and (e) goal orientation.

Essence of NPO. The first assumption concerns the essence of NPO vis-à-vis the government. NPOs, particularly those positioning themselves as champions of democracy, often aspire to serve as watchdogs of government. By taking on issues such as human rights, education, health, or physical activity, they strive to offer an alternative to the typical Arab “allocation state” (Hvidt, 2019), where the government plays a dominant role in providing citizens’ needs. Consequently, NPOs aim to promote empowerment and self-reliance. Nonetheless, while Western NPOs typically actively lobby governments for support, in the Arab context, the opposite trend of distancing from state oversight is on display. The danger for NPO, as Herrold and AbouAssi (2023) note, is that this may bolster autocracy as savvy government managers may use a range of regulatory measures to co-opt these organizations in supporting particular policy agendas.

Polity. The second assumption involves the polity of the nonprofit sector as a societal institution promoting civic engagement, cooperation, and concern for the common good. Polity in this sense refers to the collective identity of NPO that are organized by some form of politically institutionalized social relations and can mobilize resources (Treib et al., 2007). Polity is closely connected to the watchdog function, as an expression of governance, and emphasizes the need for NPO’s independence. Galal and Selim’s (2013) review of Arab development since World War II reveals that the lack of inclusive economic and political institutions has significantly contributed to underdevelopment across the region. In this context, NPOs often adopt inclusive missions, serving all groups in society, despite having membership-based governance structures.

Process. The third assumption focuses on the processes and mechanisms by which capacity building occurs and is naturally linked to the polity. Two overarching perspectives on NPO capacity building emerged. The first views capacity as an emergent phenomenon, shaped by internal and external pressures that require NPOs to adapt continuously. Hence, capacity building is seen as inherent to any organization. The second emphasizes a strategic, rational process, consistent with the argument of Millar and Doherty’s (2016) process model for nonprofit sport organizations: “essentially capacity building, at its core, is rooted in strategic management” (p. 371). Along similar lines, Abu-Serdaneh et al. (2022) found that Jordanian NPOs adopting grant-acquisition strategies can significantly alter their governance, human resources, and overall performance.

Cultural Conditioning. The third assumption, cultural conditioning, permeates the three levels of capacity building and involves the very foundations that give rise to individual, organizational, and societal activities. Although culture appears only once in the data set, its role emerges as a critical factor. This is because culture serves as an organizing force that enables meaningful interactions between individuals, groups, and communities (Spencer-Oatey & Franklin, 2012). Peterson and Smith (1997) elaborate that “the link between nation and culture tends to occur because people prefer to interact with other people and be guided and politically governed by institutions consistent with values and beliefs with which they identify,” (p. 934). The Arab culture is defined by the Arabic language and Islam, which unites the thinking, values, and behaviors of Arab people. As

Najm (2015) writes, “Islam . . . is the guiding religion for the work and lives of Muslims” (pp. 423–24), but Arab societies are not culturally homogeneous. Thus, NPO operating in the Arab region will display unique characteristics and behaviors which may not be consistent with similar organizations in the West. Jiang et al. (2018) highlight how the traditional Arab collectivist culture encourages more people to volunteer for NPOs and good causes. In Saudi Arabia, this pro-social motivation often reflects community identity, diverging from the more individualistic volunteer motivations found in Western contexts (Grönlund et al., 2011; Jardim & Marques da Silva, 2018). Nevertheless, a Western lens may interpret volunteering in Arab countries as underdeveloped, given limited awareness and a volunteering culture and rising material wealth (Ashtieh, 2013; Ezz El-Arab, 2012). However, this conclusion warrants caution: In many Islamic traditions, assisting others and contributing to society are a moral and spiritual obligation that may not require formal institutional frameworks. The culture assumption, thus, runs somewhat counter to the polity assumption for greater institutionalization of the third sector, as it defies formalization.

Goal Creation. The final assumption, goal orientation of capacity building, involves NPO’s *raison d’être*, which is concerned with generating value for their members and the broader community. This idea parallels Sen’s (1999) concept of flourishing, representing the outcome dimension of capacity building. The studies reviewed provide diverse illustrations of value creation, such as establishing safe spaces for topical debates, legitimizing previously marginalized activities (e.g., women’s football), encouraging pro-social behavior like volunteering, and promoting organizational and individual learning. Demonstrating concrete results is crucial for any NPO, given the competition for legitimacy, resources, and public attention. Because of the cultural assumptions noted above, the nature and type of value delivered by Arab NPO may differ significantly from the value provided in a Western context.

Discussion

This scoping review examined how capacity building within Arab countries has been explored in the literature, identified the central topics that define the nonprofit sector’s role, and outlined the lessons that can guide NPOs operating in these contexts. Despite an initial pool of 219 studies, only 20 (20%) met our inclusion criteria, reflecting the *region’s underexplored nature of NPO capacity building*. Nevertheless, these studies covered diverse capacity-building issues at *individual* (e.g., skills acquisition), *organizational* (e.g., decision-making and self-regulation), and *nation state* (e.g., promoting a shared society) levels.

The review found that most research on NPO capacity building in the Arab region centers on organizational dimensions such as financial resources, human resources, governance, and strategic planning. These topics dominate literature across sectors like environment, sport, advocacy, and education. However, critical sectors such as health, housing, and philanthropy remain underrepresented, limiting a comprehensive understanding of capacity-building practices across the Arab NPO sector. A possible

explanation for this gap lies in the Islamic interpretation of good citizenship, which emphasizes self-improvement and social responsibility without the need for formal institutionalization (Hvidt, 2019).

The bibliometric analysis of the studies revealed key themes such as governance, youth, and regional constraints, but also pointed to the limited scope of the data set. Quantitative approaches, such as formal goal setting, were more prominent in the reviewed studies, with less emphasis on qualitative dimensions like self-assessment and reflective practices (Ghinolfi et al., 2014). This finding suggests a need for stronger theoretical foundations and context-specific frameworks in Arab NPO capacity-building research, echoing Kacou et al.'s (2022) argument that many studies lack robust conceptual anchors.

Attending to the first research question concerning construct clarification is critical not only for building new theory but also for developing measures, comparing, aggregating, and replicating empirical studies (Post et al., 2020). The capacity building construct was analyzed in two parts, including a general literature review and then by synthesizing the selected studies. There was virtually no difference between the main properties of the construct in both parts, which showed consistency in terms of interpreting capacity building as a systems phenomenon involving personal, organizational, and societal levels. Both the Islamic and conceptual interpretations of capacity as an emergent combination of attributes, assets, capabilities, and relationships (Zinke, 2006) allow for considering two main paradigms for its investigation. The first paradigm approaches capacity building as a strategic intent by focusing on the rational management functions of the NPO. It aligns with the emphasis placed on the need for better governance and reflects the polity assumption in terms of boundary setting between the state and civil societies. The second paradigm sees capacity as an inherent characteristic of all humans and NPO for self-improvement, which suggests a more interpretive, anthropological, and sociological lens. Consistency was noted about the capacity-building construct, which embraces both processes (e.g., business model implementation and decision-making) and structures (e.g., partnerships and learning mechanisms). The most novel finding is the dominance of two specific forms—adaptive capacity and soft power. These forms mirror political, economic, and religious imperatives: The push for Arabstyle modernization obliges NPOs to navigate politically sensitive landscapes and renegotiate taken for granted values. By contrast, NPO capacity building in Western contexts is typically linked to remedying state or market failures in service delivery.

State support for religion is common worldwide, yet, as Brown (2017) observes, "What is unusual in the Arab world is not the public role of religion but the extent and range of that role" (p. 4). He further notes that, despite broad regional similarities, profound socio-political differences persist in how state and religion interact; even where governments seek control, religious institutions often retain significant autonomy and influence.

Regulatory diversity provides a concrete illustration: Post-2011 legislation in Tunisia allows near-automatic NPO registration, whereas Egypt still requires ex-ante security approval; these contrasting rules create different capacity-building priorities for governance and fundraising.

There was a distinct lack of studies in seven key domains of social and economic lives of Arab societies, including health, social services, development and housing, philanthropy, international, religion, and business and professional unions. This finding reveals significant gaps in our knowledge about the capacity construct as each of these domains provides a different socioeconomic and political context, which in turn shapes processes and structures within NPO.

The second research question aimed to reveal the core assumptions underpinning the capacity-building construct. Five key assumptions emerged that illustrate how NPOs balance internal capacity development with external pressures, emphasizing their strategic and societal roles. Each assumption carries with it theoretical and methodological challenges: (a) essence: NPOs that position themselves as champions of democracy often face challenges, such as the risk of being co-opted by governments through regulatory or funding pressures (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023); (b) polity: NPOs strive to formalize their roles within societies that often lack inclusive economic and political institutions (Galal & Selim, 2013); (c) process: A tension exists between adaptive capacity (responding to local political and social pressures) and strategic management models (focused on rational goal-setting and long-term planning; Abu-Serdaneh et al., 2022; Millar & Doherty, 2016); (d) cultural conditioning: The Arab collectivist ethos influences volunteerism and social engagement, although Western perspectives often view volunteering in Arab countries as underdeveloped (Ezz El-Arab, 2012; Jiang et al., 2018); (e) goal orientation: NPOs actively create value through tangible outcomes such as debate spaces, legitimization of marginalized issues, community mobilization, and organizational learning, which align with Sen's (1999) capabilities approach to development. However, these outcomes are contingent on the interplay between the previous four assumptions.

The five interrelated assumptions capture the multifaceted realities of capacity-building efforts in the Arab world, shaped by political, social, and cultural factors. They further explain why some NPOs (e.g., in sports) might emphasize soft power to achieve policy influence (AlKhalifa & Farello, 2021), while others adopt oppositional stances to claim autonomy and legitimacy (Herrold, 2018). These assumptions correspond closely to the main properties of the concept construction and allow for developing measures, comparisons, and replication of studies. For example, positioning NPO as a counter to public authorities requires ensuring their political, economic, social, and legal independence and reconstructing the polity. But this is not the only way to conceive of NPO, as often they are seen as partners to public authorities and are invited to contribute to various initiatives. This entails reconsidering NPO's essence, processes, and goal orientation. As Ulleberg (2009) observed,

NPOs are no longer small-scale actors, simply interested in “filling up” the vacuum left by government. They have grown into powerful, though not disinterested, voices of civil society. They also realize that, to strengthen their role in this arena, they may need to shift their areas of interest from limited-service provision to capacity development, whatever this nebulous concept may imply. (p. 13)

Theoretical Implication

This is the first attempt to organize and synthesize the scattered literature on capacity building in the Arab nonprofit sector. This is an important issue at a time when the states in the region have been actively trying to diversify their economies by mobilizing the societal potential with the critical help of NPO at the same time. The theoretical (and political) takeaway of the study entails reconsideration of the polity where several dominant types of governance of the sector are possible, including “network governance,” “statism,” “pluralism,” and “corporatism” (Eising & Kohler-Koch, 1999). The evidence presented suggests that the Arab countries have been moving away from the “statism” form of governance of the sector to “network governance,” but this remains an under-researched topic. A promising pathway for future theory development concerns the reconstruction of polity through network governance, as the interplay between informal (i.e., religion) and formal institutions (i.e., government agencies/NPO) in capacity building. Two forms of network governance, including participant-governed and lead organization-governed networks (Provan & Kenis, 2008), complement the distinction of institutions between informal and formal, respectively. A key feature of network governance, which overlaps with one of capacity-building’s main assumptions, is its goal-directedness. Theorization of Helmke and Levitsky’s (2012) typology of informal institutions (i.e., religion/family), including complementary, accommodating, competitive, and substitutive, can enhance our understanding of the role of each type in capacity building. The strategic intent approach to capacity building is more aligned with the competitive and substitutive type of institutions, whereas the complementary and accommodating type of institutions fit capacity building as an inherent characteristic of all humans and systems.

The present scoping review is particularly beneficial in assessing the range and extent of research in an area using a systematic approach. The study clarified the construct by identifying its six main types pertinent to the process and structure of capacity building, the two dominant perspectives on the subject, as well as the five core assumptions underpinning the construct.

The scoping approach systematically captures both English and Arabic sources, potentially mitigating language biases that often characterize international reviews (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Dobrescu et al., 2021). This broader lens reveals a more culturally inclusive understanding of capacity-building practices across multiple Arab nations (Levac et al., 2010; Peters et al., 2021). Admittedly, we make no claim for an all-exhaustive review of this vast field and for the quality of publications, although for our benefit, we did assess this.

In addition, this review provides the first attempt to map the structural and intellectual domain of Arab NPO capacity building through preliminary bibliometric insights. Although constrained by only 20 studies, the keyword co-occurrence clusters offer an indicative view of emergent themes, “governance,” “youth,” “universities,” and regional constraints, that merit deeper analysis. Sustained bibliometric efforts with expanded data sets could clarify how capacity-building discourse evolves over time and across diverse subfields and its effect on addressing current social, political, and economic issues.

The review findings suggest that the five core assumptions (essence, polity, process, cultural conditioning, and goal orientation) underscore the multidimensionality of NPO capacity building in the region. It also reaffirms the significance of integrating Islamic financial mechanisms, forging strategic partnerships, and adopting culturally informed approaches to volunteering. The field of NPO capacity building in the Arab region has developed in the direction of its institutionalization (i.e., polity) and the associated need for better governance, which aligns the modernization imperative with meaningful Islamic values and practices.

From a research point of view, there is a need for theorizing the interplay between the two overarching perspectives on NPO capacity building, including as an emergent phenomenon (i.e., Islamic interpretations), inherent to any organization, and as a strategic and rational process (i.e., modernization), respectively. Empirically, this will require innovative research designs emphasizing longitudinal processes of adaptations and innovations across many diverse contexts.

Lessons for Arab NPOs

Building organizational capacity in Arab NPOs requires a balance between local cultural dynamics, institutional frameworks, and evolving social and political needs. By identifying key capacity-building issues, types, and relevant capabilities, the study highlights the relationship between intentions, agency, interactions, and the policy tools used to achieve those goals. The review suggests several key theoretical and practical considerations consistent with the capacity-building concept's main assumptions and pathways for future development.

Adopting Flexible yet Strategic Approaches

NPOs in the Arab region often face fluid environments, where top-down governance reforms intersect with grassroots initiatives. Combining adaptive strategies, such as quick responses to crises, with long-term planning helps NPOs tackle immediate challenges while maintaining clear goals and direction (Millar & Doherty, 2016; Strichman et al., 2018). The findings emphasize the need for both adaptive and strategic management to ensure sustainability.

Leveraging Islamic Social Finance Mechanisms

As discussed, Islamic social finance mechanisms such as Zakat, Sadaqah, and Awqaf are deeply embedded in the ethical and spiritual dimensions of capacity building in Arab contexts. Beyond their religious significance, these tools serve as practical instruments that NPOs can leverage for sustainability, legitimacy, and community trust. Policymakers and NPOs should explore ways to integrate these tools into broader capacity-building strategies, particularly for marginalized communities or sensitive political issues. These mechanisms provide financial autonomy and public legitimacy, strengthening both sustainability and relevance in local contexts.

Strengthening Public–Private and Public–NPO Partnerships

Partnerships can improve organizational capacity by facilitating knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and better governance (Kassem et al., 2021; Salih & Dolah, 2022). NPOs seeking to influence policy can use collaborations with public and private sectors to advocate for local community needs and shape national agendas (i.e., network governance). Engaging strategically with these sectors can increase NPOs' effectiveness in policy advocacy.

Embedding Cultural Sensitivity Into Volunteerism and Community Engagement

Unlike Western models that emphasize formal volunteer programs, many Arab societies rely on collectivist and faith-driven norms that encourage informal service participation (Hvidt, 2019; Jiang et al., 2018). NPOs should tailor their volunteer strategies to these local norms, recognizing that family and religious networks often drive engagement. Some NPOs have integrated Islamic teachings into volunteerism, emphasizing spiritual motivation and community ties, offering a useful model for culturally relevant volunteer strategies (Hvidt, 2019).

Enhancing Institutional Independence and Governance

Positioning NPOs as watchdogs can strengthen democratic dialogue and accountability (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023). However, to maintain credibility, NPOs must preserve their independence, particularly in politically sensitive environments where government regulations or donor pressures can compromise their mission. Strengthening internal governance, diversifying funding sources, and clarifying shared values help NPOs sustain their autonomy while remaining effective advocates. Institutional independence can be bolstered by improved governance frameworks and diverse funding sources (Herrold & AbouAssi, 2023).

Prioritizing Value Creation for Communities

Following Sen's (1999) concept of functioning and capabilities, NPOs should demonstrate tangible outcomes such as improvements in health, environmental awareness, and civic engagement. Focusing on community benefits enhances local support, legitimacy, and sustainable funding. NPOs should emphasize measurable impacts, not just service delivery, to show long-term community empowerment and societal change. This strengthens both donor confidence and community trust.

Limitations and Further Research

Several limitations must be considered when interpreting the findings of this review. First, the relatively small data set (20 studies) limits the generalizability of the results and leaves

several areas underexplored. Key sectors such as health, housing, and philanthropy remain underrepresented, highlighting the need for future research that includes these sectors. In addition, while Arabic databases were included, other regional languages (e.g., French) were not systematically searched, which could have excluded relevant studies, particularly from North Africa. The studies were published in a wide range of outlets, which may have impacted the consistency of interpretations and the focus of debates. Furthermore, bibliometric analysis provides preliminary insights into emerging thematic clusters. However, a larger data set and more comprehensive bibliometric methods are necessary to validate and expand these findings. Future research should address these limitations by conducting longitudinal studies to track the evolution of capacity-building practices and by including longer timeframes for analysis. Expanding the bibliometric analysis to include larger data sets and incorporating sector-specific research would also be valuable for capturing a more nuanced picture of how NPOs in the Arab world build capacity and contribute to national and regional development goals.

A supplementary search using French-language terms identified three potentially relevant studies, primarily from North Africa (Abu-Sada & Challand, 2013; Bendimerad et al., 2019; Dahmani & Saidani, 2020). These aligned closely with our review themes, suggesting their inclusion would have enriched regional examples but not significantly altered our findings.

Conclusion

This scoping review provides the *first comprehensive synthesis* of NPO capacity-building studies in Arab countries, revealing that capacity building is a *critical yet under-studied* component of the nonprofit sector. The review highlights *multiple levels* of capacity, individual, organizational, and nation-state, and underscores the *complex interplay* of governance, resources, cultural norms, and external pressures that shape capacity-building efforts. The study contributes to existing literature by *mapping* key themes, such as *governance, youth engagement, and regional constraints*, and by providing *preliminary bibliometric insights*. It also highlights *Islamic social finance mechanisms, partnerships, and cultural sensitivity* as pivotal factors for enhancing NPO sustainability in the region.

As Arab countries advance “Visions 2030” and other national development agendas, NPOs are uniquely positioned to align strategic planning with cultural legitimacy, thus contributing to social, economic, and environmental objectives. Further research should focus on underrepresented sectors such as health and philanthropic services, refine bibliometric analyses, and integrate longitudinal perspectives to track how NPO capacity evolves over time. This review sets the foundation for future research on NPO capacity building in the Arab world, paving the way for more inclusive, sustainable development strategies that leverage local cultural strengths and institutional support.

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Note

1. Covidence works only with English sources, so the data reported in this section exclude the Arab studies.

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