

LATENT RELATIONAL CAPITAL AS A MECHANISM OF CRISIS ACTIVATION: INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES FOR OLDER PEOPLE DURING AND AFTER THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN CLUJ-NAPOCA, ROMANIA (2018–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the role of latent relational capital as the critical initial condition enabling rapid inter-institutional collaboration during the COVID-19 pandemic in social services for older people in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. Drawing on qualitative longitudinal research using constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014), organised across two phases of data collection (Phase I, 2021–2022; Phase II, 2025–2026), the study examines how pre-existing professional relationships that had not been operationalised prior to the crisis – defined as latent relational capital – enabled the activation of coordination mechanisms within days of the pandemic onset. The central argument is that crisis does not create inter-institutional collaboration, but activates a pre-existing relational infrastructure whose formation is a slow, cumulative process. Post-pandemic trajectories demonstrate that this infrastructure persists differentially, depending on actors' structural position in the institutional field. The article contributes to neo-institutional theory and collaborative governance literature by specifying the mechanisms through which informal relational structures convert into operational coordination under acute external pressure, and by documenting the structural conditions under which this conversion produces durable versus temporary institutional change.

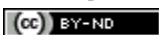
Keywords: latent relational capital, inter-institutional collaboration, social services for older people, constructivist Grounded Theory, post-pandemic resilience, neo-institutionalism

INTRODUCTION

The question of how institutions collaborate in crisis conditions has attracted sustained attention in the sociology of organisations and public administration

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(Ansell and Gash 2008; Carroll et al. 2025). The standard account holds that crisis generates collaboration through coercive pressure, resource dependence, or shared threat perception. This article proposes a complementary account: crisis does not create the capacity for rapid collaboration; it activates a pre-existing relational infrastructure formed through years of routine co-presence in a shared institutional field.

The concept deployed here – latent relational capital – refers to accumulated professional relationships characterised by mutual recognition of roles, informal trust and knowledge of institutional boundaries, which have not been converted into active operational collaboration prior to a triggering event. In the theoretical landscape of social capital (Putnam 2000) and organisational sociology (DiMaggio and Powell 1983), this construct occupies an undertheorised space: neither active collaboration nor the absence of relationship, but a dormant infrastructure available for rapid mobilisation.

The empirical case examined is the institutional ecosystem of social services for older people in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, during the period 2018–2025. Romania's social services sector presents structurally productive conditions for this analysis: chronic underfunding that structurally requires inter-institutional coordination (Adăscăliței et al. 2020), a developing non-governmental sector with long-established but primarily informal ties to public institutions, and a pandemic that generated acute coordination demands within days of its onset.

The article is organised in six sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 develops the theoretical framework around latent relational capital, neo-institutionalism, and collaborative governance. Section 3 describes the methodology. Sections 4 and 5 present empirical findings on the activation of latent relational capital during the pandemic and its post-crisis trajectories. Section 6 discusses theoretical contributions and policy implications.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Latent Relational Capital: Defining the Construct

Social capital theory (Putnam 2000; Bourdieu 1986) identifies the productive value of social relationships, but typically focuses on active networks. The concept of latent resilience capacity (Linder 2019) – dormant competencies activatable under pressure – provides a useful precedent for thinking about relational structures that exist but are not currently mobilised. This article extends this logic to the relational dimension of institutional fields.

Latent relational capital is defined as the stock of professional relationships between institutional actors – characterised by familiarity, reciprocal role recognition and minimal trust – accumulated through sustained co-presence in a shared field, without being converted into operational collaboration. It differs from active social capital in requiring a triggering condition for conversion; it differs from the absence

of social capital in that relationships exist and their conversion is rapid rather than requiring construction from scratch. The construct addresses a specific empirical puzzle: how can institutions with no prior formal collaboration protocols achieve operational coordination within days of a crisis onset?

Neo-Institutional Theory and the Depth of Institutional Change

Neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2014) analyses mechanisms through which organisations adopt practices under coercive, mimetic and normative pressures. Scott's (2014) distinction between the regulative, normative and cultural-cognitive pillars of institutionalisation is analytically useful here: crisis-induced collaboration operated primarily at the normative pillar – professional behavioural norms activated by emergency – without penetrating the regulative or cultural-cognitive pillars. This explains the documented reversibility of many pandemic-era collaborative arrangements, since once the normative pressure of urgency subsided, practices reverted without having been codified in regulative structures or absorbed into cultural-cognitive schemas.

The concept of institutional agency (Battilana and D'Aunno 2009) complements this framework by specifying the conditions under which actors can modify rather than simply reproduce institutional logics. Post-pandemic trajectories differ not by the intensity of crisis-era collaboration but by actors' structural positions – mandates, resources, temporal horizons – which determine their capacity to reframe crisis experience as transferable institutional capacity.

Collaborative Governance and Pre-Crisis Infrastructure

Collaborative governance theory (Ansell and Gash 2008) identifies prior collaborative history as a key initial condition for governance processes. The empirical contribution of this article is to specify what form that history takes in contexts of chronic underfunding and informal sector relationships: not formal prior agreements, but a relational infrastructure of familiarity and trust. The Collective Impact model (Kania and Kramer 2011) describes conditions for successful multi-actor coordination – shared agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a backbone organisation. Data from Cluj-Napoca show these conditions emerging spontaneously during the pandemic, suggesting that Collective Impact logic can arise inductively when relational density is sufficient and crisis pressure intense enough.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2014) in a longitudinal perspective qualitative design covering the period 2018–2025. The choice

of Grounded Theory is consistent with the objective of generating analytical categories inductively from data rather than testing pre-specified hypotheses. The longitudinal perspective – tracking the same institutional field over seven years – enables the capture of slow-moving institutional changes invisible to cross-sectional designs.

Data collection was organised across two phases. Phase I (2021–2022) combined analytical memos drawing on the researcher’s direct observational access to the Cluj-Napoca institutional field between 2020 and 2022 through professional engagement in community development, documentary analysis of six informal civic initiatives active during the pandemic, primary institutional documents (Prefectural Annual Report 2020; Internal Report SAPV no. 809/2020, DASM Cluj-Napoca), and a semi-structured interview with the city manager then responsible for pandemic coordination within the Prefecture Institution, subsequently reconstructed as a Grounded Theory analytical memo and validated through written confirmation.

Phase II (2025–2026) comprised eight semi-structured formal interviews with institutional actors in Cluj-Napoca selected through theoretical sampling: two public sector actors from the Cluj County Prefecture Institution and the Directorate for Social and Medical Assistance Cluj-Napoca (DASM), four non-governmental organisations providing community services for older people, one informal civic initiative with community medical activity, and one emergency medical services representative. Sixteen participants and data sources in total were included across both phases.

Open coding generated 47 initial codes. Axial coding produced six analytical families – inter-institutional collaboration, structural barriers, crisis as catalytic factor, institutionalisation and persistence, institutional resilience, and actor profiles – and selective coding identified adaptive cross-sectoral coordination as the central category. Grounded Theory analytical memos constituted the bridge between raw data and theoretical categories, ensuring analytical process traceability. The research received ethical clearance from the Babeş-Bolyai University Ethics Committee (Approval no. 227/26.03.2026).

THE FORMATION AND ACTIVATION OF LATENT RELATIONAL CAPITAL

The Pre-Pandemic Field: Familiarity Without Active Collaboration

The pre-pandemic period (2018–2019) was characterised by institutional stability and structural underfunding. Home care services reached only 13–18 beneficiaries annually from a population of approximately 55,000 older residents – below 0.03% coverage; residential capacity of 497 places covered under 1% of potential need; and NGO subsidies under Law 34/1998 covered less than half the real cost of services (DASM Cluj-Napoca 2025; INS 2023). This chronic underfunding produced a dense

informal network of workarounds and professional relationships that constitute latent relational capital in its pre-activation form.

A coordinator with extended experience in integrated services captured the essential character of this period: *“We had known each other for years. Each of us was doing our own job – there was no formal collaboration – but we knew exactly who to call if a specific need arose, and we were confident we would receive a response. That was what mattered most”* (coordinator, integrated services organisation, Phase I, 2022). The statement does not describe operational collaboration but accumulated professional familiarity – mutual recognition of roles and responsibilities, informal confidence in responsiveness, knowledge of institutional boundaries. Its defining feature is the asymmetry between existence and activation: relationships are present and trust is sufficient for rapid mobilisation, but no coordination occurs in normal conditions.

Crisis Activation: Three Simultaneous Coordination Forms

The pandemic onset in March 2020 activated three simultaneous coordination mechanisms, all building directly on pre-existing relational capital. None required negotiating new relationships or establishing legitimacy from scratch; transaction costs of emergency coordination were dramatically reduced precisely because the relational infrastructure was already in place.

The first mechanism was vertical coordination through the Prefecture Institution, which established an operational WhatsApp group with 125 partners within days of lockdown. The speed of this mobilisation is explained directly by one public coordination actor: *“We knew who to call, without needing to introduce ourselves”* (public coordination institution, Phase II, 2026). The 2020 Annual Report of Cluj County Prefecture Institution formally documents this process, attributing successful crisis management explicitly to inter-institutional and interpersonal cooperation built before the emergency.

The second mechanism was horizontal coordination through six informal civic initiatives that emerged or were reactivated within the first weeks: *“Un Singur Cluj”*, a solidarity platform uniting cultural organisations, local authorities and civil society, raised approximately 191,538 euro in 60 days with over 100 partner organisations; *“Vă ajutăm din Cluj”* mobilised 92 active volunteers to deliver 537 packages to 345 beneficiaries and operated a dedicated call-centre from 25 March 2020; SuperMed, Beard Brothers, CERT Transilvania and Rescue 4&4 each filled specialised coordination or logistics functions. A civic coordinator described the underlying dynamic: *“The actors already knew each other; the crisis simply activated something that was already there”* (civic initiative, Phase II, 2026).

The third mechanism was operational collaboration producing directly measurable outcomes. The partnership between DASM Cluj-Napoca and the

Inspectorate for Emergency Situations for home vaccination of immobilised older people resulted in over 1,400 beneficiaries reached. The DASM coordinator described how the collaboration began: *“They came to us before we had even asked for support and placed all their resources at our disposal without any need for negotiation”* (DASM Cluj-Napoca, Phase II, 2026). In the same period, a home-delivered meals organisation expanded from 25 to 140 beneficiaries in seven days through an ad-hoc partnership with hospitality sector kitchens whose venues had been closed by lockdown restrictions (Phase II 2025).

The Conversion Mechanism

The conversion of latent relational capital into operational coordination operates through a specific sequence: shared threat recognition creates a common agenda without requiring formal agreement; pre-existing familiarity eliminates the verification phase normally required in new partnerships; and informal channels substitute for institutional procedures, compressing decision cycles from weeks to hours. This sequence differs from standard crisis collaboration accounts in one crucial respect: it does not generate new social capital in the acute crisis phase – it converts existing latent capital into operational form. The implication for post-crisis dynamics is direct: once crisis pressure subsides, the converted capital may revert to latent form, which is precisely what the post-pandemic evidence documents.

POST-PANDEMIC TRAJECTORIES: DIFFERENTIAL PERSISTENCE

Analysis of Phase II data (2025–2026) reveals that the institutional actors studied followed divergent post-pandemic trajectories despite having participated in the same crisis-era collaborative arrangements. The determining factor is not the intensity of pandemic-era collaboration but each actor’s structural position in the institutional field – their mandate, resource base and temporal horizon.

The Prefecture Institution exemplifies **transformation**: pandemic-era coordination capacities were not archived after the emergency but reframed as transferable institutional repertoire. When the Ukrainian refugee crisis arrived in 2022, the groundwork required no reconstruction. As one participant described: *“When the refugee crisis came, we knew exactly what to do. We had had a general rehearsal”* (public coordination institution, Phase II, 2026). The WhatsApp coordination group with 125 partners remains operational in 2026, six years after its initial activation. This trajectory illustrates double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1978): not only were procedures adapted, but the crisis experience was reframed as transferable institutional capacity – a reframing made possible by the Prefecture’s mandate, which explicitly encompasses coordination rather than direct service delivery.

DASM Cluj-Napoca illustrates **legitimised reversibility**: the structured discontinuation of emergency-phase collaborations once the crisis resolved. *“The emergency passed, and it was natural for the collaborations associated with it to end as well”* (DASM Cluj-Napoca, Phase II, 2026). This is not institutional failure but a mandate-consistent structural response: institutions designed for direct service delivery return to their operational focus once urgency subsides. Partial sedimentation has nonetheless occurred – online counselling and digital coordination have persisted as working practices, even as the emergency-specific collaborative arrangements were appropriately terminated.

Non-governmental organisations demonstrate **consolidated recovery**: pre-pandemic service capacity was restored with enhanced relational capital and expanded scope. Socialisation groups doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels and have been sustained, reflecting the lasting effect of strengthened inter-organisational trust rather than a simple return to status quo (Phase II, 2026).

Informal civic initiatives entered **latent resilience**: their platforms did not formally institutionalise, but the relational infrastructure persists and remains available for reactivation. *“The informal network remains latent and can be activated in other contexts whenever a new need arises”* (civic initiative, Phase II, 2026). The clearest empirical confirmation is the reactivation of “Un Singur Cluj” in 2022 for the refugee crisis with the same actors and mechanisms, demonstrating that latent resilience is real operational capacity, not merely potential.

Within latent resilience, the evidence identifies three distinct sub-trajectories that differ in the durability of underlying relational infrastructure. Active latent resilience, illustrated by „Un Singur Cluj”, involves reactivation in a subsequent crisis and depends on the permanence of the founding organisations. Continuous latent resilience, illustrated by „Vă ajutăm din Cluj” and SuperMed, involves founding organisations that remain active and retain reactivation potential without having yet been mobilised again. Dormant latent resilience, illustrated by Beard Brothers, CERT Transilvania and Rescue 4&4, involves a significant pandemic contribution explicitly documented in the official Prefecture Annual Report 2020, followed by complete invisibility in the intervening period, with no mechanism to record their competencies or contacts for future crises. This internal variation refines the concept developed by Linder (2019) by introducing a structural dimension: the durability of latent resilience depends on whether the organisations anchoring the relational network have permanent institutional presence.

A cross-cutting mechanism differentiates trajectories across all four categories: documentation practices. Organisations that systematically recorded crisis-response innovations retained an institutional memory that facilitated recovery or transformation. Those that did not – often due to resource constraints or the sheer pace of emergency response – found that accumulated knowledge dissipated when urgency receded. One coordinator articulated this structural vulnerability clearly: *“We did not write*

down anywhere what worked. If new people come along, they start from scratch” (NGO coordinator, Phase II, 2025). The failure of institutional memory is not a matter of individual negligence but of structurally produced conditions: organisations operating under resource constraints have no spare capacity for documentation during a crisis, and the informal channels that made collaboration fast during the emergency left no systematic record.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Theoretical Contributions

The primary contribution of this article is the specification of latent relational capital as a distinct analytical construct with predictive value for understanding crisis-activated collaboration. The construct fills a theoretical gap between active social capital – which requires ongoing investment to maintain – and the absence of social capital – which would predict slow and costly collaboration under crisis conditions. The empirical evidence presented here shows that the activation of latent relational capital explains how institutions with no prior formal coordination protocols can achieve effective operational collaboration within days.

This finding complements neo-institutional accounts of crisis collaboration (Carroll et al. 2025) by specifying the relational mechanism through which prior collaborative history produces its effects. It is accumulated professional familiarity – not formal prior agreements – that reduces transaction costs in emergency coordination. The article also contributes to collaborative governance literature (Ansell and Gash 2008) by documenting a case in which Collective Impact conditions emerged inductively rather than through deliberate design, suggesting that the model’s coordination logic can arise as a consequence of sufficient relational density under external pressure, and not only as the result of strategic planning.

The identification of three sub-trajectories within latent resilience – active, continuous and dormant – refines the concept developed by Linder (2019) by introducing a structural dimension. The durability of latent resilience depends on whether the organisations that anchor the relational network retain permanent institutional presence; where they do not, the capacity remains real but invisible and unactivatable without the social costs of rediscovery.

Limits

The research is circumscribed to a single municipality with a comparatively developed institutional ecosystem and civil society infrastructure, and results follow the logic of analytical generalisation (Lincoln and Guba 1985): the mechanism identified is proposed as a conceptual instrument applicable in contexts with similar

structural characteristics, not as a description of a representative sample. Beneficiary perspectives are absent, since data were collected exclusively from institutional actors and coordinators; how older people themselves experienced crisis-era service changes remains an important dimension for future research. The Phase II temporal window (2023–2025) captures trajectories at one moment; some may continue to evolve, particularly if legislative changes under Law 100/2024 modify the structural conditions for inter-institutional coordination.

Policy Implications

Three structural implications emerge from the analysis. The first concerns pre-crisis investment: building inter-institutional relationships through joint activities, professional networks and cross-sector encounters before emergencies arise is an investment in crisis readiness, not a secondary activity. The evidence shows that organisations that treated inter-institutional relationships as peripheral paid higher coordination costs during the pandemic and demonstrated slower recovery once urgency receded.

The second concerns civic capacity mapping. Beard Brothers, CERT Transilvania and Rescue 4&4 made significant, officially documented contributions during the pandemic and then returned to complete invisibility. Converting dormant latent resilience into preparedness-oriented resilience (Wildavsky 1988) requires only a periodic municipal registry of civic organisations with crisis experience – recording their competencies, contact details and conditions for activation. The infrastructure for maintaining such a registry already exists in the form of DASM or the Prefecture Institution; what is missing is the mandate and the routine.

The third concerns institutional memory as a structural condition rather than an administrative preference. Creating dedicated time and modest resources for post-crisis knowledge documentation within social services organisations – recording what worked, what did not, and who was involved – addresses a vulnerability currently reproduced structurally across the sector. Without this, each new crisis restarts largely from scratch in terms of formal coordination, even when the informal relational capital is still present.

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