A Typology of Strategic Collective Decision-making in Health NGOs

Peter Mazunga and Noel J. Pearse
Rhodes University, Makhanda, South Africa

petermazunga@yahoo.com
N.Pearse@ru.ac.za

Abstract: Strategic collective decision-making in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) has been largely neglected by researchers, with limited attention given to how contextual conditions shape the unfolding of strategic decisions in practice. This paper examines decision-making in health NGOs operating under resource constraints, donor pressures, and governance complexity. The findings are drawn from a more extensive Straussian grounded theory study of five diverse South African health NGOs, in which data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The research identified three types of strategic collective decision-making: *Simple, Conventional, and Onerous.* This typology emerges from specific configurations of contextual factors, including funding uncertainty, stakeholder salience, governance structures, and information ambiguity, and reflects distinct patterns of strategic collective decision-making. Simple strategic collective decision-making is characterised by pragmatic coordination and moderate consultation in response to manageable strategic challenges. On the other hand, conventional strategic collective decision-making reflects routinised and historically embedded practices that provide organisational stability but may limit critical reflection. Finally, onerous strategic collective decision-making arises under conditions of high uncertainty and organisational risk, involving intensive collective deliberation, emotional engagement, and complex negotiation among strategic decision-makers. The findings demonstrate that strategic collective decision-making is a contextually contingent and negotiated organisational practice. NGOs move dynamically between the types as contextual pressures shift, with each type reflecting different levels of perceived risk, urgency, and organisational alignment. In this way, strategic collective decision-making is understood as an interactive process through which organisations continuously balance inclusivity, responsiveness, and sustainability. The paper therefore offers a contextually sensitive understanding of how strategic decisions are enacted in mission-driven organisations, and provides practical insights for NGO leaders, funders, and policymakers directly or indirectly involved in collective strategic decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, particularly in resource-constrained and donor-driven environments.

Keywords: Collective decision-making, Strategic decision-making, Strategic leadership, Non-governmental organisations

1. Introduction

Health NGOs play an important role in addressing public health challenges, particularly in contexts where state healthcare systems face resource and capacity constraints. In South Africa, health NGOs contribute significantly to Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/ Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Tuberculosis (TB), maternal health, and broader community health interventions (Swilling and Russell, 2002; Habib, 2013). However, these organisations frequently operate within unstable environments characterised by donor dependency, resource uncertainty, shifting policy priorities, and increasing accountability pressures (Ebrahim, 2003; Lewis, 2009). Within such contexts, strategic collective decision-making becomes critical for organisational sustainability and service continuity.

Despite the strategic importance of decision-making in NGOs, existing literature has largely focused on governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and participatory ideals, with limited attention given to how strategic collective decision-making unfolds in practice within mission-driven organisations (Renz and Herman, 2016; Lewis, Kanji and Themudo, 2020). Decision-making scholarship has also predominantly emerged from corporate and public-sector settings (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992; Langley et al., 1995), where assumptions of managerial rationality and hierarchical authority may inadequately reflect the relational and contextual realities of NGOs.

The South African health NGO context intensifies these complexities. Health NGOs must continuously navigate unstable funding environments, donor-driven programme priorities, competing stakeholder expectations, and evolving public health demands (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015). Strategic collective decision-making is therefore shaped not only by formal governance structures but also by contextual dynamics such as organisational culture, stakeholder salience, trust, information ambiguity, and perceived organisational risk. Under conditions of uncertainty, strategic collective decision-making may become fragmented, delayed, emotionally demanding, or politically contested (Leach, 2016).

Although prior studies acknowledge factors influencing decision-making in NGOs, including leadership style, organisational culture, donor pressures, and stakeholder complexity (Hailey and James, 2004; Noor, Isa and Muhammad, 2021), limited empirical attention has been given to how contextual conditions shape distinct forms of strategic collective decision-making in practice. Existing research has also tended to privilege

governance structures and planning processes over the lived organisational dynamics through which strategic decisions are collectively negotiated and enacted (Md Isa et al., 2021).

This paper addresses this gap by examining strategic collective decision-making within South African health NGOs. Drawing on findings from a broader Straussian grounded theory study conducted across five diverse health NGOs, the paper focuses on three empirically derived types of strategic collective decision-making: Simple, Conventional, and Onerous. These types reflect different patterns of strategic interaction that emerge under varying contextual conditions and organisational complexity levels. The paper argues that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs is not a uniform or linear process, but rather a contextually contingent and negotiated organisational practice. By identifying three types of strategic collective decision-making, the paper provides a context-sensitive understanding of how strategic decisions are enacted within mission-driven organisations operating under conditions of uncertainty and resource constraints.

2. Literature Review

Decision-making has long been recognised as a central organisational process influencing strategy, performance, and organisational sustainability. Early decision-making theories conceptualised decisions as rational and linear processes (Simon, 1947; 1997), while later scholarship emphasised bounded rationality, uncertainty, and the socially constructed nature of organisational decision-making (Weick, 1995; Langley et al., 1995; Schilirò, 2018). Consequently, collective decision-making is increasingly viewed as a dynamic and contextually embedded process shaped by relationships, power dynamics, organisational conditions, and stakeholder interactions (Carmeli, Brueller and Dutton, 2009). Although collaborative decision-making can enhance participation, information sharing, and legitimacy (Sagie and Aycan, 2003), it may also become politically contested and more complex under conditions of uncertainty (Leach, 2016).

Strategic decision-making research has similarly evolved from rational models towards recognising the influence of environmental uncertainty, leadership, and organisational context. Eisenhardt (1989) argues that effective strategic decision-making in dynamic environments depends on the leadership teams' ability to integrate information rapidly and adaptively, while Elbanna and Child (2007) demonstrate that strategic decisions are shaped by both behavioural and contextual factors. More recent scholarship further conceptualises strategic decision-making as a socially embedded and adaptive process through which organisations respond to complexity and change (Shepherd and Rudd, 2014; Cristofaro, 2021).

These dynamics are particularly evident within NGOs, which operate in hybrid governance environments characterised by donor dependency, social missions, multiple accountability relationships, and resource constraints (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Lewis, 2009). In South African health NGOs, strategic decision-making is further influenced by unstable funding environments, evolving public health priorities, donor pressures, and stakeholder complexity (Banks, Hulme and Edwards, 2015). Consequently, strategic collective decision-making extends beyond formal governance procedures and is shaped by organisational culture, trust, stakeholder influence, and perceived organisational risk.

Existing NGO scholarship has largely focused on governance structures, accountability systems, and participatory leadership (Ebrahim, 2003; Lewis, 2009), while studies have shown that donor dependency, information ambiguity, and environmental uncertainty significantly influence organisational behaviour (Bebbington, 2005; Andrews, 2014). Under these conditions, strategic decision-making often becomes more deliberative, politically contested, and emotionally demanding (Kruke and Olsen, 2011). However, limited attention has been given to explaining how contextual conditions shape different forms of strategic collective decision-making within NGOs, particularly under varying levels of organisational risk and uncertainty (Md Isa et al., 2021).

Recent scholarship increasingly positions strategic collective decision-making as a contextually embedded process influenced by uncertainty, stakeholder complexity, adaptive governance, and organisational resilience (Cristofaro, 2021; Healey, Querbes and Bleda, 2021; Bryson, Crosby and Barberg, 2023). Similarly, nonprofit governance research highlights the growing importance of adaptive leadership and organisational resilience in sustaining mission delivery within volatile funding and policy environments (Singh, Martins and Tefera, 2022; Kazanskaia, 2025). Despite these advances, limited empirical research explains how contextual conditions give rise to distinct forms of strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs.

This paper addresses that gap by examining how contextual conditions shape three empirically derived types of strategic collective decision-making: Simple, Conventional, and Onerous. In doing so, it contributes a context-sensitive understanding of strategic decision-making within mission-driven organisations operating under conditions of uncertainty, governance complexity, and resource constraint.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on findings from a broader qualitative study that employed Strauss and Corbin's (1990; 1998) grounded theory methodology to explore strategic collective decision-making within South African health NGOs. Grounded theory was considered appropriate because the study sought to develop an empirically grounded understanding of how strategic collective decision-making unfolds in complex, resource-constrained organisational environments. The study was conducted across five diverse South African health NGOs operating within different programme and funding contexts. Purposive and theoretical sampling techniques were used to identify participants with strategic leadership responsibilities. Eighteen strategic leaders participated in the study, with a combined 220 years of experience in health NGOs, including CEOs, COOs, executive directors, and leaders in Finance, Programme, HR, and Monitoring and Evaluation. All participants occupied strategic leadership positions with direct responsibility for organisational governance and strategic decision-making. This diverse leadership profile provided multiple perspectives on collective strategic decision-making across organisational contexts.

Data were collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, which ranged from approximately 45 to 90 minutes and explored participants' experiences of strategic decision-making, governance practices, stakeholder engagement, donor influence, and organisational responses to changing contextual conditions.

Data analysis followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998) grounded theory procedures of open, axial, and selective coding. Constant comparative analysis and memo writing were used throughout the analytical process to identify recurring patterns, relationships, and contextual conditions that influence decision-making. Theoretical saturation was reached when additional interviews yielded no substantively new conceptual categories or relationships. Through iterative analysis, three distinct types of strategic collective decision-making emerged: Simple, Conventional, and Onerous.

4. Findings: Types of Strategic Collective Decision-making in Health NGOs

Data analysis revealed that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs does not occur through a single uniform process. Rather, organisations move dynamically between different forms of strategic collective decision-making, depending on contextual conditions, organisational pressures, and perceived levels of strategic risk. Three interrelated types of strategic collective decision-making emerged from the analysis (i.e. Simple, Conventional, and Onerous), reflecting varying levels of deliberative intensity, stakeholder engagement, organisational uncertainty, and strategic complexity. The findings suggest that strategic collective decision-making in health NGOs is highly context-sensitive and negotiated, with organisations shifting between the three types as conditions change.

4.1 Simple Strategic Collective Decision-making (SSCDM)

Simple strategic collective decision-making emerged in contexts characterised by manageable levels of uncertainty and relatively contained strategic challenges. This type of decision-making was commonly associated with operational adjustments, moderate programme changes, and decisions where organisational implications were perceived as limited and manageable. Participants described simple strategic collective decision-making as pragmatic, coordinated, and solution-oriented, with decisions generally reached through moderate consultation among relevant organisational strategic leaders without prolonged deliberation. One participant explained:

> *"It's normally not a hefty debate... more like: here's the issue, what do you think?" (NGO 1_Leader 2_10)*

Another participant reflected on the simplicity and responsiveness of these processes:

> *"We don't complicate things. We ask the key questions: What's the issue? Who needs to act? What's the impact? And then we move." (NGO 1_Leader 5_23)*

Simple strategic collective decision-making was frequently shaped by contextual conditions such as stable donor relationships, clear information, manageable programme demands, and relatively low organisational risk. Under such conditions, leadership teams maintained collaborative engagement while preserving decision-making efficiency. The findings further indicate that Simple SCDM relied heavily on operational intelligence, existing organisational trust, and established communication structures. One participant noted:

> *"Before deciding, we always check with Ops. Can this work, given what's happening on the ground?" (NGO 1_Leader 3_21)*

Another participant highlighted the role of informal collaboration and collective alignment:

> *"We talk on WhatsApp, sometimes a few voice notes back and forth. Before you know it, we have the skeleton of a decision ready for the team to build on." (NGO 2_Leader 2_11)*

Participants consistently associated simplicity with efficiency rather than the absence of strategic depth. As one participant explained:

> *"Simplicity doesn't mean it's not strategic. It means we don't waste time or energy. We make decisions that move us forward." (NGO 4_Leader 2_24)*

Although disagreement and contestation were generally limited within Simple SCDM, participants acknowledged that decisions could become more complex as contextual pressures intensified. Funding uncertainty, stakeholder disagreement, or increased organisational risk could quickly shift decision-making toward more deliberative and demanding forms.

4.2 Conventional Strategic Collective Decision-making (CSCDM)

Conventional strategic collective decision-making reflected routinised and historically embedded organisational practices that provided stability and continuity within health NGOs. This type was associated with established governance procedures, recurring strategic discussions, and familiar organisational processes that had become institutionalised over time. Participants frequently described conventional strategic collective decision-making as guided by organisational norms, formal governance structures, and established decision-making routines. One participant explained:

> *"We've been doing strategy planning like this for years. The director calls a meeting, the heads of units prepare their inputs, and we discuss for a couple of hours. Everyone knows their role." (NGO 2_Leader 2_8)*

Another participant highlighted the predictability and familiarity associated with this mode of decision-making:

> *"The system's a bit old school, but it gives structure. You know what to expect, and that's reassuring, especially in a chaotic environment." (NGO 1_Leader 3_22)*

Conventional strategic collective decision-making was strongly influenced by organisational history, governance routines, and institutional memory. Board structures, Executive committee (Exco) meetings, programme reviews, and donor reporting cycles frequently shaped the rhythm and structure of strategic deliberations. One participant reflected:

> *"There's a standing agenda every time Exco meets. You don't just show up. You need to do your research... then we have a fruitful discussion." (NGO 4_Leader 1_12)*

Participants further noted that conventional strategic collective decision-making created procedural predictability and collective buy-in, even during difficult strategic decisions:

> *"Even if it's not your way, if the process is fair, you respect the outcome." (NGO 1_Leader 2_14)*

The findings indicate that conventional strategic collective decision-making contributed positively to organisational stability by reducing ambiguity and reinforcing governance consistency. Established procedures enabled organisations to respond efficiently to recurring strategic matters while maintaining collective involvement among leadership teams. However, participants also highlighted limitations associated with this type of decision-making. In some cases, routinised governance processes constrained flexibility and reduced critical reflection. One participant noted:

> *"Sometimes it feels autocratic, but that's okay. We can't all be involved in every decision." (NGO 1_Leader 2_14)*

Another participant reflected on the tendency toward procedural inertia:

> *"You come into the room knowing what's likely to be said. It's not rigid, it's just... known. That's comforting." (NGO 4_Leader 1_12)*

The findings therefore suggest that while conventional strategic collective decision-making enhances organisational continuity, predictability, and governance legitimacy, it may also limit adaptability and innovation under rapidly changing organisational conditions.

4.3 Onerous Strategic Collective Decision-making (OSCDM)

Onerous strategic collective decision-making emerged under conditions of heightened uncertainty, elevated organisational risk, and significant strategic consequences. This type represented the most intensive and emotionally demanding form of strategic collective decision-making identified in the study. Participants associated Onerous SCDM with funding crises, donor compliance pressures, organisational restructuring, programme pivots, and decisions carrying significant operational or reputational implications. One participant described the emotional burden of these processes:

> *"We knew whatever we chose, someone would suffer. It wasn't just strategic; it was deeply personal." (NGO 3_Leader 1_22)*

Another participant reflected on the exhausting nature of prolonged strategic deliberations:

> *"You end up with decision fatigue. It's not that people are indecisive, it's the system that tires them out." (NGO 1_Leader 2_14)*

Unlike Simple or Conventional strategic collective decision-making, Onerous SCDM involved heightened levels of uncertainty, stakeholder contestation, and emotional engagement. Participants described repeated meetings, circular deliberations, and ongoing negotiations aimed at balancing organisational sustainability with mission commitments and donor expectations. One participant explained:

> *"It's like we meet, defer, meet again... it goes in circles. Nothing gets finalised." (NGO 1_Leader 2_10)*

Another participant highlighted the impact of donor uncertainty on strategic processes:

> *"When the donor shifts priorities, we don't bypass our processes, but it creates a lot of internal stress. Everyone's scrambling." (NGO 4_Leader 1_26)*

The findings further suggest that Onerous SCDM exposed underlying tensions relating to leadership authority, trust, inclusion, and organisational culture. Participants frequently described situations in which consultation became prolonged and emotionally draining. As one participant noted:

> *"It can be demoralising. You go through the motions, but you know your input won't change the outcome." (NGO 1_Leader 5_22)*

Another participant reflected on the cumulative organisational strain created by unresolved strategic processes:

> *"By the third or fourth time the same issue comes back, people just say, 'Whatever you decide is fine.'" (NGO 1_Leader 2_14)*

Participants also associated Onerous SCDM with extended governance and external validation loops involving boards and donors, which frequently delayed implementation and intensified organisational fatigue.

> *"One issue can bounce between the donor, the board, and us for months. You lose steam." (NGO 4_Leader 2_26)*

The findings therefore suggest that Onerous SCDM extends beyond procedural governance processes and becomes a deeply relational, emotionally charged, and interpretive organisational activity. Under these conditions, leadership teams engage in intensive collective sensemaking while attempting to reconcile uncertainty, organisational survival, stakeholder expectations, and mission alignment.

Figure 1 illustrates the iterative and multi-layered nature of Onerous Strategic Collective Decision-Making (OSCDM) within health NGOs. The figure demonstrates that strategic decisions under heightened uncertainty often involve prolonged deliberation, repeated consultation, stakeholder engagement, and recursive governance processes before collective organisational alignment is achieved.

4.4 Dynamic Movement Between the Three Types

Although the three types are analytically distinct, the findings indicate that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs is fluid rather than fixed. Organisations moved dynamically between Simple, Conventional, and Onerous strategic collective decision-making as contextual conditions shifted. Participants emphasised that strategic decision-making could evolve rapidly in response to funding uncertainty, stakeholder pressures, governance demands, and emerging organisational risks. One participant reflected on how relatively manageable strategic issues could quickly intensify:

"The issue went from being about office space to being about sustainability and strategic focus." (NGO 1_Leader 2_12)

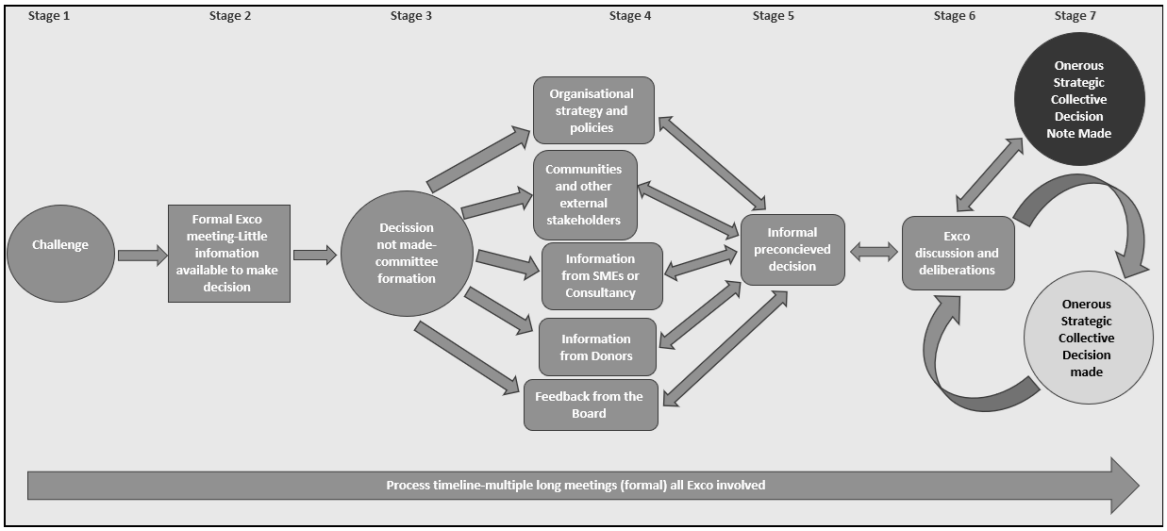


Figure 1: Process dynamics of Onerous Strategic Collective Decision-Making (OSCDM)

Another participant explained how donor pressures could rapidly transform strategic processes:

"You would think the urgency would push things forward, but it made people more cautious." (NGO 3_Leader 2_30)

The findings further suggest that strategic collective decision-making frequently shifted between routinised governance processes and more deliberative, emotionally demanding forms depending on organisational context. However, participants also highlighted how familiar governance routines could become strained under heightened uncertainty:

"Every choice opened another set of questions. It was big." (NGO 3_Leader 3_14)

The movement between the three types was strongly shaped by contextual conditions such as donor dependency, stakeholder salience, information ambiguity, and organisational vulnerability. Participants described how strategic processes that initially appeared straightforward could become prolonged and onerous as uncertainty increased. One commented:

"What was meant to be collective turned into political manoeuvring." (NGO 1_Leader 5_22)

Another participant reflected on the cumulative effect of prolonged strategic uncertainty:

"You feel like you're paddling hard, but you're stuck in the same place." (NGO 2_Leader 1_20)

The findings, therefore, demonstrate that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs is neither linear nor static. Rather, it is a dynamic and contextually contingent organisational practice through which leadership teams continuously negotiate organisational alignment, responsiveness, and sustainability under changing organisational conditions.

Table 1 summarises the principal characteristics of the three empirically derived types of strategic collective decision-making identified in this study. Although analytically distinct, the three types should be understood as contextually contingent rather than fixed categories. Health NGOs move between these types as organisational conditions, stakeholder pressures, and environmental uncertainty evolve.

5. Discussion

The findings, synthesised in Table 1, demonstrate that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs is a dynamic organisational process shaped by contextual conditions rather than fixed governance procedures. Consistent with contemporary strategic decision-making scholarship (Eisenhardt, 1989; Elbanna and Child, 2007; Cristofaro, 2021), strategic leadership teams continuously adapt their collective decision-making practices in response to uncertainty, stakeholder pressures, and organisational risk. The study therefore provides a context-sensitive understanding of how strategic decisions are enacted within mission-driven organisations. Rather than

supporting purely rational or hierarchical models of decision-making (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992; Simon, 1997), the findings suggest that strategic collective decision-making is inherently relational, negotiated, and adaptive. The three types represent varying levels of deliberative intensity, ranging from pragmatic coordination under manageable conditions (Simple SCDM) to routinised governance processes that promote organisational stability (Conventional SCDM) to intensive collective decision-making under conditions of heightened uncertainty (Onerous SCDM). While governance routines enhance consistency, they may also constrain adaptability when organisations encounter rapidly changing environments (Ebrahim, 2003; Renz and Herman, 2016).

Table 1: Empirically derived characteristics of the three types of strategic collective decision-making

Strategic collective decision-making characteristics			
Dimension	**Simple SCDM**	**Conventional SCDM**	**Onerous SCDM**
Typical context	Stable operating environment	Routine strategic governance	High uncertainty and organisational disruption
Contextual conditions	Manageable strategic challenges	Established governance routines	Funding crises, donor pressure, organisational risk
Level of uncertainty	Low	Moderate	High
Stakeholder involvement	Relevant internal stakeholders	Formal governance structures (Exco, Board)	Extensive internal and external stakeholder engagement
Decision process	Pragmatic and coordinated	Structured and routinised	Iterative, negotiated, and adaptive
Deliberative intensity	Low to moderate	Moderate	High
Governance complexity	Limited	Formalised	Multi-layered and recursive
Information ambiguity	Low	Moderate	High
Decision timeframe	Relatively short	Predictable and cyclical	Extended and iterative
Primary organisational outcome	Strategic operational responsiveness	Strategic organisational stability	Srategic organisational sustainability
Dominant characteristic	Pragmatic coordination	Procedural stability	Collective sensemaking under uncertainty

The findings further support scholarship emphasising the socially constructed nature of strategic decision-making (Weick, 1995). Funding uncertainty, donor pressures, stakeholder salience, and information ambiguity shaped the unfolding of collective strategic decision-making across participating NGOs. Rather than applying a single governance approach, organisations moved dynamically between the three decision-making types as contextual conditions changed, highlighting strategic collective decision-making as an adaptive capability that enables organisations to balance inclusivity, responsiveness, organisational sustainability, and mission alignment (Cristofaro, 2021; Bryson, Crosby and Barberg, 2023).

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that effective strategic leadership depends less on rigid procedural governance than on the capacity to adapt collective decision-making processes to varying organisational conditions. NGO strategic leaders, boards, funders, and policymakers should therefore recognise that different strategic contexts require different forms of collective engagement if organisations are to remain resilient and mission-focused under conditions of uncertainty. The principal theoretical contribution of this study is the identification of an empirically derived typology demonstrating that strategic collective decision-making varies according to contextual conditions rather than following a single governance model.

5.1 Practical Implications

The study's findings have important practical implications for NGO leaders, boards, funders, and policymakers operating in resource-constrained, uncertain environments. The identification of Simple, Conventional, and Onerous strategic collective decision-making highlights that strategic decisions within health NGOs do not require uniform governance responses. Different contextual conditions require varying levels of consultation, deliberation, and collective engagement.

For NGO leadership teams, the findings emphasise the importance of adaptive leadership capabilities and contextual awareness in managing strategic collective decision-making processes. Leaders may need to balance procedural governance requirements with responsiveness, relational engagement, and organisational agility, particularly under conditions of heightened uncertainty and donor pressure.

The findings also suggest that governance structures should remain sufficiently flexible to accommodate varying levels of strategic complexity. Overly rigid governance processes may constrain responsiveness during periods of organisational instability, while insufficient consultation may undermine collective alignment and organisational legitimacy.

For donors and policymakers, the study highlights how funding uncertainty and compressed decision timelines can intensify organisational pressure and contribute to prolonged or onerous strategic decision-making processes. Greater recognition of the operational realities facing NGOs may support more sustainable and context-sensitive funding and governance approaches.

Ultimately, the study suggests that effective strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs depends not only on formal governance structures but also on organisations' capacity to adapt their collective strategic processes to changing organisational and environmental conditions.

5.2 Research Recommendations

Future research should further examine how the three types of strategic collective decision-making identified in this study manifest across different NGO sectors, governance environments, and national contexts. While this study focused specifically on South African health NGOs, similar contextual pressures relating to donor dependency, stakeholder complexity, and organisational uncertainty may also influence strategic collective decision-making within other mission-driven organisations operating in resource-constrained environments.

Comparative studies across different countries and NGO subsectors may provide deeper insight into how contextual, cultural, and institutional factors shape movement between Simple, Conventional, and Onerous strategic collective decision-making. Longitudinal research may further enhance understanding of how organisations transition between these types over time, particularly during periods of organisational crisis, leadership transition, funding instability, or significant policy change.

Future studies could also explore the role of organisational culture, psychological safety, leadership style, and governance maturity in shaping collective strategic processes. Additional research examining the relationship between donor influence and strategic organisational autonomy may further clarify how external accountability pressures affect collective decision-making within NGOs.

Finally, future grounded theory and qualitative studies may continue extending context-sensitive approaches to strategic decision-making by exploring how collective strategic processes unfold within increasingly volatile and uncertain organisational environments.

6. Conclusion

This paper examined strategic collective decision-making within South African health NGOs operating under conditions of resource constraint, donor pressure, and governance complexity. Drawing on findings from a broader Straussian grounded theory study, the paper identified three interrelated types of strategic collective decision-making: Simple, Conventional, and Onerous. The findings demonstrate that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs is not a fixed or linear process, but a contextually contingent and negotiated organisational practice shaped by uncertainty, stakeholder pressures, governance dynamics, and organisational risk. Simple strategic collective decision-making reflects pragmatic coordination under manageable conditions. Conventional strategic collective decision-making highlights the stabilising role of routinised governance practices, while Onerous strategic collective decision-making emerges under conditions of heightened uncertainty requiring intensive deliberation and collective sensemaking.

The study contributes a context-sensitive understanding of strategic collective decision-making within mission-driven organisations and suggests that effective strategic leadership depends less on rigid procedural governance and more on the capacity to adapt collective strategic processes to changing organisational conditions. While the study focused on South African health NGOs, the findings may have broader relevance for mission-driven organisations operating in uncertain, resource-constrained environments. Ultimately, the paper argues that strategic collective decision-making within health NGOs is best understood as an adaptive and negotiated organisational process through which leadership teams balance inclusivity, responsiveness, organisational sustainability, and mission alignment under changing contextual conditions.

Ethics Declaration: This paper forms part of a broader doctoral study that received ethical clearance from Rhodes University prior to data collection (ethics approval number: 2024-8080-9127).

AI Declaration: Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used in a limited capacity during the preparation of this paper to assist with grammatical editing, language refinement, and readability.

References

Andrews, A. (2014), "Downward Accountability in Unequal Alliances: Explaining NGO Responses to Zapatista Demands", *World Development*, Vol. 54, pp. 99–113, doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2013.07.009.

Banks, N., Hulme, D. and Edwards, M. (2015), "NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?", *World Development*, Vol. 66 No. 1, pp. 707–718, doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2014.09.028.

Bebbington, A. (2005), "Donor-NGO relations and representations of livelihood in nongovernmental aid ahains", *World Development*, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 937–950, doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2004.09.017.

Bryson, J.M., Crosby, B.C. and Barberg, B. (2023). Public value governance and strategic public management. Edward Elgar Publishing eBooks, pp.92–113. doi:https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789907193.00015.

Carmeli, A., Brueller, D. and Dutton, J.E. (2009), "Learning behaviours in the workplace: The role of high-quality interpersonal relationships and psychological safety", Systems Research and Behavioral Science, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 81–98, doi: 10.1002/sres.932.

Cristofaro, M. (2021). Organizational sensemaking: a systematic review and a co-evolutionary model. European Management Journal, 40(3). doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emj.2021.07.003.

Ebrahim, A. (2003), "Accountability In Practice: Mechanisms for NGOs", World Development, Vol. 31 No. 5, pp. 813–829, doi: 10.1016/S0305-750X(03)00014-7.

Edwards, M. and Hulme, D. (1996), "Too close for comfort? the impact of official aid on nongovernmental organizations", *World Development, [Online*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 961–973, doi: 10.1016/0305-750x(96)00019-8.

Eisenhardt, K.M. (1989). Making fast strategic decisions in high velocity environments. Academy of Management Journal, 32(3), pp.543–576. doi:https://doi.org/10.2307/256434.

Eisenhardt, K.M. and Zbaracki, M.J. (1992), "Strategic decision making", Strategic Management Journal, Vol. 13 No. S2, pp. 17–37.

Elbanna, S. and Child, J. (2007). The Influence of Decision, Environmental and Firm Characteristics on the Rationality of Strategic Decision-Making. Journal of Management Studies, 44(4), pp.561–591. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.2006.00670.x.

Habib, A. (2013), "South Africa's Suspended Revolution", Ohio University Press, doi: 10.18772/12013086086.

Hailey, J. and James, R. (2004), "Trees Die From the Top': International Perspectives on NGO Leadership Development", *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 343–353, doi: 10.1007/s11266-004-1236-8.

Healey, M.P., Querbes, A. and Bleda, M. (2021). Costs of collective wisdom: How resources influence information aggregation in organizational decision making. Strategic Organization, p.147612702110038. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/14761270211003849.

Kazanskaia, A.N. (2025). Organisational Practices for Enhancing Resilience in Non-Profits. NEYA Global Journal of Non-Profit Studies. doi:https://doi.org/10.64357/neya-gjnps-rslpsstrldtm-06.

Kruke, B.I. and Olsen, O.E. (2011), "Knowledge creation and reliable decision-making in complex emergencies", Disasters, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 212–232, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-7717.2011.01255.x.

Langley, A., Mintzberg, H., Pitcher, P., Posada, E. and Saint-Macary, J. (1995), "Opening up decision making: The view from the black stool", *Organization Science*, Vol. 6 No. 3, pp. 260–279.

Leach, D.K. (2016), "When Freedom Is Not an Endless Meeting: A New Look at Efficiency in Consensus-Based Decision Making", *The Sociological Quarterly*, Vol. 57 No. 1, pp. 36–70, doi: 10.1111/tsq.12137.

Lewis, D. (2009), "Non-Governmental Organizations and Development", doi: 10.4324/9780203877074.

Lewis, D., Kanji, N. and Themudo, N.S. (2020), "Non-Governmental Organizations and Development", *| Abingdon, Oxon*, Routledge, New York, NY, doi: 10.4324/9780429434518.

Md Isa, F., Noor, S., Nik Mohammad, N.M. and Mohd Adnan, M.M. (2021), "Leadership and decision making challenges among elderly care centre operators: case of multi-ethnic Malaysia", *Leadership in Health Services*, Vol. 34 No. 4, pp. 512–526, doi: 10.1108/lhs-05-2021-0033.

Noor, S., Isa, Fm. and Muhammad, N.M.N. (2021), "Managerial Obstacles Facing the Ageing Care Centres: A Case of Malaysian Women Entrepreneurs", *Vision: The Journal of Business Perspective*, Vol. 25 No. 3, pp. 312–321, doi: 10.1177/0972262921996495.

Renz, D.O. and Herman, R.D. (Eds.). (2016), *The Jossey-Bass Handbook of Nonprofit Leadership and Management*, John Wiley & Sons, Inc, Hoboken, NJ, USA, doi: 10.1002/9781119176558.

Sagie, A. and Aycan, Z. (2003), "A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Participative Decision-Making in Organizations", *Human Relations*, Vol. 56 No. 4, pp. 453–473, doi: 10.1177/0018726703056004003.

Schilirò, D. (2018), "Economic Decisions and Simon's Notion of Bounded Rationality", *International Business Research*, Vol. 11 No. 7, pp. 64–75, doi: 10.5539/ibr.v11n7p64.

Shepherd, N.G. and Rudd, J.M. (2014). The Influence of Context on the Strategic Decision-Making Process: A Review of the Literature. International Journal of Management Reviews, 16(3), pp.340–364. doi:https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12023.

Simon, H. A. (1947). Administrative Behavior: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organization. New York: Macmillan.

Simon, H.A. (1997), *Administrative Behavior : A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organizations*, Free Press, New York.

Singh, S., Martins, A. and Tefera, O. (2022). Nonprofit organisational resilience: Proposing a conceptual adaptive capacity framework. Acta Commercii, 22(1). doi:https://doi.org/10.4102/ac.v22i1.1077.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1990), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park.

Strauss, A.L. and Corbin, J.M. (1998), *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.

Swilling, M. and Russell, B. (2002), *The Size and Scope of the Non-Profit Sector in South Africa*, Centre for Civil Society, University of Natal, Durban.

Weick, K. (1995), *Sensemaking in Organizations*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, CA.