

INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE IN SOCIAL SERVICES
SERVING OLDER PEOPLE: INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION
AS A MECHANISM OF POST-PANDEMIC INSTITUTIONAL
ADAPTATION IN CLUJ-NAPOCA (2018–2025)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how inter-institutional collaborative practices functioned as a mechanism of institutional adaptation in social services for older people in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (2018–2025). Drawing on qualitative research with a longitudinal perspective and constructivist Grounded Theory, the study combines two phases of data collection: Phase I (2020–2022), comprising eight actors and documentary sources, and Phase II (2025–2026), comprising six semi-structured interviews with institutional actors (two public institutions, three non-governmental organisations, and one civic initiative).

The findings reveal four distinct trajectories of institutional adaptation: recovery (non-governmental organisations), transformation (Prefecture institution), legitimised reversibility (Directorate for Social and Medical Assistance), and latent resilience (civic initiatives). The central contribution of the article is the development of a model of adaptive cross-sectoral coordination as an explanatory mechanism of differentiated institutional adaptation. The analysis demonstrates that the same pandemic shock produced divergent long-term trajectories depending on each actor's mandate and structural position within the institutional field.

Keywords: institutional resilience, inter-institutional collaboration, social services for older people, Grounded Theory, COVID-19 pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted the most severe test of institutional resilience for European social care systems in recent decades. In Romania, where chronic underfunding and fragmentation of the social sector had already been well documented (Roşu & Petrescu, 2021), the crisis simultaneously amplified structural vulnerabilities and compelled unprecedented forms of inter-institutional collaboration (Adăscăliţei *et al.*, 2020). Three years after the end of the state of alert (March, 2022), the central question is no longer whether institutions survived the crisis, but what remains, three to five years later, of the inter-institutional collaborative capacities developed during that period – as distinct from the general institutional survival of the organisations themselves.

This question has not yet received systematic answers in the Romanian social work literature. Existing studies on the institutional response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Chirugu & Damean, 2023; Roşu & Petrescu, 2021) have focused predominantly on the acute crisis phase, without adopting a longitudinal perspective capable of tracing institutional trajectories beyond the emergency. International research (Carroll *et al.*, 2025; Li, 2026) suggests that post-pandemic institutional resilience is structurally heterogeneous; however, the mechanisms generating this heterogeneity have rarely been investigated empirically in the context of Romanian social services.

Comparative evidence from other national contexts supports this heterogeneity: in the United States, (Fleming *et al.*, 2024) show that pre-existing relational capital and system-alignment investments made prior to the pandemic were decisive predictors of organisational and community resilience during COVID-19, while (Pfaff *et al.*, 2022), studying long-term care organisations in Germany, similarly link systemic agency capacity to the maintenance of person-centred care under crisis conditions. Longitudinal evidence tracing institutional trajectories beyond the acute crisis phase remains scarce even in this international literature – a gap to which the present article's added value, situated in a semi-consolidated Eastern European democracy, directly responds.

This article addresses this gap through a qualitative study with a longitudinal perspective (2018–2025), conducted in Cluj-Napoca and grounded in constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014). The central contribution of the article is the development of an analytical model of adaptive cross-sectoral coordination, constructed inductively from a comparative analysis of interviews and institutional documents. The model explains how the same pandemic shock produced differentiated institutional trajectories depending on actors' mandates and structural positions within the institutional field.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. NEO-INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND CRISIS-INDUCED CHANGE

Neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2014) posits that organisations adopt similar practices under the influence of three types of isomorphic pressure: coercive, mimetic, and normative. In the context of crisis, such pressures may intensify, generating conditions conducive to accelerated institutional change.

Applied to the present study, the neo-institutional framework provides an interpretive lens for understanding the differences observed across organisations. Some actors integrated pandemic-era practices into permanent organisational infrastructures, whereas others reverted to pre-existing operational logics once the crisis pressure subsided. In this sense, the key analytical variable is not the type of institutional pressure alone, but the depth of institutional change that these pressures generate.

Theoretical approaches applied to social work emphasise the centrality of collaboration within systemic perspectives on social intervention. Social workers interact continuously with beneficiary networks, professional colleagues, and partner agencies. This perspective supports the interpretation that pre-pandemic institutional-relational capital functioned empirically as a structural resource that could be rapidly activated under crisis conditions.

1.2. COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE AND COLLECTIVE IMPACT

The concept of collaborative governance describes institutional arrangements in which public and non-state actors participate directly in joint decision-making processes, with the aim of producing outcomes that no single actor could achieve independently (Ansell & Gash, 2008).

Similarly, the *Collective Impact model* (Kania & Kramer, 2011), characterised by a shared agenda, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and the presence of a backbone organisation, provides a useful analytical framework for interpreting several collaborative configurations documented in this research. Importantly, these collaborative forms emerged empirically rather than being designed through explicit application of the model, suggesting that similar coordination logics can arise inductively under conditions of crisis.

1.3. ORGANISATIONAL RESILIENCE: TYPOLOGIES

A recent conceptualisation of institutional resilience distinguishes three fundamental components: absorption, adaptation, and transformation (Li, 2026). The empirical findings of the present research extend this typology by introducing a fourth form, latent resilience, which refers to mobilisation capacities that do not become formally institutionalised but remain available for reactivation in subsequent crisis contexts.

This extension highlights the importance of recognising resilience not only as an observable organisational outcome but also as a latent structural capacity embedded in relational networks.

Terminological clarifications. Several analytical terms used throughout this article require explicit definition. Structural positioning refers to an actor's location within the institutional field, defined jointly by its formal mandate, its access to resources, and its temporal horizon of action (short-term operational versus long-term coordinating mandates). Behavioural alignment refers to the observable convergence of organisational practices around shared informal norms of collaboration (e.g., response times, communication channels), without this convergence being formally codified in procedures. Intensive collaboration refers to a high frequency and density of inter-organisational interactions during the acute crisis phase, regardless of whether these interactions were later institutionalised. Shared standards refer to informally converging professional expectations regarding acceptable collaborative practice, generated through repeated interaction rather than through formal accreditation processes. Partial institutional sedimentation refers to the retention of a subset of crisis-era practices (typically digital communication routines) within routine organisational functioning, in contrast to total sedimentation, in which the entire repertoire of crisis-era practices becomes durably embedded, and to the absence of sedimentation, in which practices are fully discontinued. These distinctions are applied consistently in the analysis developed in Sections 3 and 4.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research employed a qualitative design with a longitudinal perspective, grounded in constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014), and organised into two phases of data collection and analysis.

Phase I (2022) combined several complementary sources of qualitative data: a semi-structured interview with the representative responsible for pandemic coordination, the city manager at the time, within the Cluj County Prefecture institution, subsequently reconstructed as a Grounded Theory analytical memo and validated through a written confirmation; analytical memos and documentary analysis covering six informal civic initiatives active in Cluj-Napoca during the pandemic – *Un Singur Cluj*, a civic solidarity platform uniting cultural organisations, local authorities, and civil society; *Vă ajutăm din Cluj*, a community volunteering network focused on elderly and vulnerable persons; *SuperMed*, a community medical assistance initiative; *Beard Brothers*, a specialised volunteering organisation; *CERT Transilvania*, a qualified emergency response association; and *Rescue 4&4*, a logistics and transport volunteering initiative – to which the researcher had direct observational access between 2020 and 2022 through her professional background in community development; and pilot testing of the research instruments with an external participant.

Phase II (2025–2026) comprised six semi-structured formal interviews with institutional actors in Cluj-Napoca, selected through theoretical sampling: two actors from the public sector (the Cluj County Prefecture institution and the Directorate for Social and Medical Assistance – DASM Cluj-Napoca), three non-governmental organisations providing community-based services for elderly people, and one informal civic initiative. This analysis is based on the sample available at the time of writing; the broader doctoral research project, of which this article presents a part, has since continued to expand the Phase II sample through additional interviews. NGOs were selected as key actors because, in the Romanian context, they represent the primary providers of home-delivered meals, home care, social canteen services, and socialisation programmes for elderly people – services whose continuity during the pandemic depended directly on inter-institutional collaboration and whose adaptive capacity is therefore central to the research question. Across both phases, a total of fourteen participants and data sources were included. The semi-structured interview guide addressed six principal themes: forms of inter-institutional collaboration and coordination during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods; structural difficulties and blockages affecting collaboration; the involvement of volunteers and civic actors; the continuity of services; institutional memory of pandemic-era innovations; and post-pandemic institutional adaptation. Interviews were conducted face-to-face or online (via Teams/Zoom), according to participants' preference, between September 2025 and March 2026, and lasted 60 to 75 minutes on average. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' explicit consent, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking; five of the participants reviewed their transcripts and confirmed their accuracy, and one participant requested the anonymisation of a specific passage, a request that was respected.

Researcher's positioning. The lead researcher holds a professional background in community development and had direct, non-research engagement with several actors in the Cluj-Napoca institutional ecosystem between 2020 and 2022, prior to the start of the doctoral research. This prior familiarity is treated in this study as an analytical resource consistent with the concept of insider knowledge (Charmaz, 2014), facilitating access to participants and a nuanced understanding of institutional context. It was also treated as a potential source of interpretive bias, managed through explicit reflexive strategies: systematic use of Grounded Theory analytical memos to examine the researcher's own expectations and interpretations, member checking of intermediate interpretations with participants, triangulation of data across multiple sources, and a deliberate temporal distance between data collection and the final analysis. The researcher's epistemic position is best described as that of a partial insider – familiar with the field but without a formal role within the investigated institutions.

Data analysis followed the standard stages of Grounded Theory: open coding (forty-seven initial codes), axial coding, and selective coding. Within the Grounded

Theory framework, an analytical family refers to a cluster of conceptually related codes organised around causal and conditional relationships identified inductively in the data.

Axial coding generated six analytical families: *Family A (Inter-institutional Collaboration)* includes codes relating to the type, frequency, degree of formalisation, and measurable outcomes of collaboration. *Family B (Structural Barriers)* includes codes relating to funding constraints, institutional bureaucracy, and resistance to change. *Family C (Crisis as Catalytic Factor)* includes codes relating to the rapid activation of collaboration, departures from formal procedures, and resources mobilised through informal networks under emergency conditions. *Family D (Institutionalisation and Persistence)* includes codes relating to the continuation of pandemic-era collaborations and the conditions under which they were maintained. *Family E (Institutional Resilience)* includes codes relating to types of post-crisis adaptation and the mechanisms through which they occurred. *Family F (Actor Profiles)* includes codes relating to structural positions and differing institutional mandates of actors within the institutional field.

The central category resulting from selective coding was identified as adaptive cross-sectoral coordination, conceptualised as a mechanism of differentiated institutional adaptation.

The research was approved by the Ethics Committee of Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work (Approval no. 227/26.03.2026). This approval covers the active data-collection stage of Phase II (2025–2026) and the systematic analytical work underlying the study. The broader longitudinal research project began in October 2019, when the author enrolled in the doctoral programme. The semi-structured interviews conducted in Phase I (2022) were carried out within the doctoral process, under the periodic supervision of the guidance committee, alongside documentary collection and direct field observation; an initial thesis draft was produced and reviewed by the committee in the same year. Following the formal ethical approval obtained in March 2026, the author carried out systematic Grounded Theory memoing – a structured process of reconstructing and reconceptualising the Phase I material through a constructivist Grounded Theory lens, consistent with the adopted methodology – in parallel with Phase II data collection (six formal semi-structured interviews, 2025–2026). This sequence reflects standard practice in longitudinal qualitative research, in which formal ethical protocols govern the active phase of direct data collection, while the analytical reconceptualisation of earlier material is carried out as an integral part of the same research project. Written informed consent was obtained from all Phase II participants prior to interview. Data are stored on secure servers accessible only to the researcher and will be fully anonymised prior to archiving upon completion of the doctoral thesis. The municipality of Cluj-Napoca is explicitly identified throughout this article because the documentary sources used are public and independently verifiable (institutional reports, official documents, and publicly

available information regarding the civic initiatives analysed). Anonymisation applies exclusively to individual interview participants, whose identities are protected through role-based codes (e.g., PUB-01, ONG-01) and cannot be reconstructed from the text.

3. RESULTS: COLLABORATIVE PRACTICES IN CLUJ-NAPOCA (2018–2025)

3.1. THE PRE-PANDEMIC ECOSYSTEM AND LATENT RELATIONAL CAPITAL

In the pre-pandemic period (2018–2019), social services for elderly people in Cluj-Napoca operated within a relatively stable yet structurally fragile institutional ecosystem, characterised by the absence of formal inter-institutional coordination mechanisms. Relationships among actors existed; however, active collaboration remained limited.

Chronic underfunding represented a persistent structural feature of this ecosystem. The coordinator of an organisation providing home-delivered meals described this constraint clearly: “The subsidy covers less than half of what the service actually costs. We get the rest from other sources, European projects, donations, fundraising events. We have been operating this way for years; the pandemic didn’t bring anything new.” (NGO Coordinator, home-delivered meals service, Phase II interview, 2025)

Empirical material from Phase I allows for the reconstruction of a pre-pandemic context in which institutional actors were familiar with one another, even in the absence of an active collaboration. A coordinator with extensive experience in integrated services described this period as follows: “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.” (NGO Coordinator, integrated services, Phase I interview, 2022)

This statement does not describe operational collaboration, but rather accumulated professional familiarity, characterised by mutual recognition of roles, responsibilities, and institutional limits. Comparative analysis of interviews conducted during Phase I indicates that this familiarity was widespread among actors, regardless of their institutional sector.

Data collected during Phase II (2025–2026) retrospectively confirm the importance of this relational foundation. Several participants emphasised that, once the crisis began, it was unnecessary to establish new relationships or negotiate legitimacy: “There was no need for introductions or explanations. We already knew who does what.” (Social services Coordinator, Phase II interview, 2025)

Taken together, these empirical fragments suggest the existence of latent relational capital, defined as pre-existing professional relationships that had not been operationalised prior to the crisis. This capital did not emerge from formal collaboration policies, but accumulated gradually through years of institutional co-presence within a relatively stable field.

From an analytical perspective, the existence of latent relational capital constituted the critical initial condition that enabled the rapid activation of collaboration during the pandemic. Trust developed through repeated professional interactions significantly reduced the transaction costs associated with emergency coordination and facilitated the immediate mobilisation of available resources.

In summary, the pre-pandemic period is empirically characterised by institutional stability, chronic structural underfunding, and the presence of latent relational capital. The findings indicate that the pandemic functioned as a triggering event that activated this latent relational capital, transforming long-standing professional familiarity into operational collaboration.

This trajectory analysis should also be read against the evolving environment in which these organisations operated across the three periods studied. The legal and funding framework – Law no. 292/2011 on social assistance, Law no. 17/2000 on social assistance for older people, and Law no. 34/1998 on subsidies for accredited non-governmental providers – remained largely stable in its structural features throughout 2018–2025, meaning that the divergent trajectories documented below cannot be attributed to changes in the regulatory environment itself. What did change across periods was the intensity of external pressure (pre-pandemic stability, pandemic-era emergency, post-pandemic normalisation) and, more recently, the emergence of the 2022 refugee crisis as a distinct, non-pandemic stress test, discussed separately in Section 4.4. The relative stability of the legal environment strengthens the inference that the differentiated trajectories observed are attributable primarily to actors' structural positioning rather than to exogenous shifts in the regulatory field.

3.2. FORMS OF COLLABORATION DURING THE PANDEMIC (2020–2022)

The empirical material indicates the simultaneous emergence of multiple coordination mechanisms that operated in parallel and mutually reinforced one another. This analytical typology was not formulated *a priori* but emerged inductively from the axial coding process. Of the six analytical families generated (described in Section 2), the most directly relevant to understanding the forms of pandemic-era collaboration are Family C and Family A.

Family C (Crisis as Catalytic Factor) explains why and how collaboration was activated, encompassing codes relating to rapid activation, departures from formal procedures, and resources mobilised through informal networks under emergency conditions. Family A (Inter-institutional Collaboration) describes the forms that collaboration assumed and their observable effects, including codes relating to collaboration type, frequency, degree of formalisation, and measurable outcomes. The remaining four analytical families (B, D, E, and F) underpin the analysis developed in Sections 3.3 and 4.

The three forms of collaboration identified did not operate independently but coexisted and reinforced one another throughout the pandemic period.

3.2.1. VERTICAL COORDINATION: THE ROLE OF THE PREFECTURE INSTITUTION

The pandemic triggered a rapid reconfiguration of the operational dynamics of the Prefecture institution. A representative described this transformation in practical terms: “A greater number of meetings, but online, operational, dynamic, with faster solutions.” (Representative, public coordination institution, Phase II interview, 2026)

The importance of pre-existing relational capital is reflected directly in participants’ accounts, which emphasised that institutional partners already possessed knowledge of one another’s roles: “We knew who to call, without needing to introduce ourselves.” (Representative, public coordination institution, Phase II interview, 2026)

The 2020 Annual Report of the Cluj County Prefecture institution provides documentary confirmation of this collaborative mobilisation, noting that: “whether we speak of the staff of territorial structures [...] or of citizens and civic initiatives, we all played an important role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic,” and that “the positive results recorded at the level of Cluj County are the consequence of this united front, of inter-institutional and interpersonal cooperation, and of the rapid and articulated response to the challenges we faced in 2020.” (Instituția Prefectului – Județul Cluj, 2020)

Institutional documentation further records the development of three public information and prevention guides on COVID-19, addressed to patients, employers, and individuals placed in isolation or quarantine (Instituția Prefectului – Județul Cluj, 2020).

From an analytical perspective, vertical coordination functioned as a legitimisation node: it provided an institutional framework and facilitated access to resources, while the concrete implementation of interventions was carried out by other actors within the ecosystem.

3.2.2. HORIZONTAL COORDINATION: INFORMAL CIVIC INITIATIVES

Distinct from vertical coordination, the empirical material indicates the emergence of horizontal coordination forms based on informal civic initiatives, which were constituted spontaneously at the onset of the pandemic. Six such initiatives were active in the Cluj-Napoca ecosystem: *Un Singur Cluj*, a civic solidarity platform uniting cultural organisations, local authorities, and civil society; *Vă ajutăm din Cluj*, a community volunteering network focused on elderly and vulnerable persons; *SuperMed*, a community medical assistance initiative; *Beard Brothers*, a specialised volunteering organisation; *CERT Transilvania*, a qualified emergency response association; and *Rescue 4&4*, a logistics and transport volunteering initiative. A civic coordinator described the mechanism of rapid mobilisation as follows: “The actors already knew each other; the crisis

simply activated something that was already there.” (civic initiative coordinator, Phase II interview, 2026)

Documentary analysis conducted during Phase I demonstrates that members of these initiatives had previously collaborated in cultural or civic projects, enabling rapid mobilisation without prior negotiation. Internal Report SAPV no. 809/2020 (Direcția de Asistență Socială și Medicală Cluj-Napoca, 2020) confirms that these initiatives functioned as active partners within the coordination network, contributing to increased service coverage rates.

From an analytical standpoint, these initiatives operated according to principles consistent with the Collective Impact model (Kania & Kramer, 2011) including a shared agenda, continuous communication, and functional complementarity. Importantly, these coordination structures emerged empirically rather than through deliberate prior design.

The latent resilience illustrated by these initiatives represents a form of operational capacity that remains largely invisible within conventional institutionalisation indicators, yet can be empirically observed through the reactivation of civic networks in subsequent crisis contexts.

3.2.3. OPERATIONAL COLLABORATION: DIRECT SERVICES FOR ELDERLY PEOPLE

A third documented form of collaboration involved direct service delivery, producing measurable outcomes for elderly beneficiaries – operationalised in this study through institutional indicators of service coverage and response capacity (number of persons reached, response time, and continuity of provision), as reported by professionals and documented in institutional records, rather than through beneficiaries’ self-reported experience (see the Limitations section). The partnership between the Directorate for Social and Medical Assistance (DASM Cluj-Napoca) and the Inspectorate for Emergency Situations (ISU) for home vaccination of immobilised elderly persons represents one of the most concrete examples.

The DASM coordinator described the partners’ proactive engagement: “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 coordinator, Phase II interview, 2026)

Internal Report no. 809/2020 (Direcția de Asistență Socială și Medicală Cluj-Napoca, 2020) confirms that more than 1,400 immobilised elderly persons received home vaccination services in 2021. The campaign initially operated with a single ambulance, progressing from approximately twelve to twenty-four vaccinations per day, as described by the coordinator: “There was just one ambulance. At first, they managed to vaccinate twelve people a day at home; later we scaled up to twenty-four.” (DASM Cluj-Napoca coordinator, Phase II interview, 2026)

Additional operational collaborations included partnerships with the hospitality sector (HoReCa) for the preparation of home-delivered meals and the development of digital literacy programmes for elderly beneficiaries. The coordinator of the home-delivered meals service explained the rapid adaptation mechanism: “The HoReCa partners had empty kitchens. We suggested they prepare meals for us. They agreed immediately.” (NGO coordinator, home-delivered meals service, Phase II interview, 2025) As a result of this collaboration, the number of beneficiaries increased from 25 to 140 within seven days.

The same internal report documents digital literacy initiatives that provided online counselling to 853 elderly beneficiaries, while weekly courses reached approximately 280 participants per month. The DASM coordinator described the lasting institutional effect:

The most persistent outcome was digitalisation – the capacity to communicate and transmit information without requiring physical presence. Although the intensity of digital interaction declined after the crisis phase, this capacity remained integrated into institutional practice. The coordinator noted, however, that direct interaction continues to be more important than the simple transmission of information in social work practice. (DASM Cluj-Napoca coordinator, Phase II interview, 2026)

3.3. POST-PANDEMIC RESILIENCE: DIFFERENTIATED TRAJECTORIES

Analysis of Phase II data (2025–2026) indicates that identical collaborative mechanisms generated divergent post-pandemic outcomes depending on actors’ structural positions within the institutional field. The four trajectories identified do not represent distinct forms of collaboration but rather different patterns of institutional adaptation produced by the same pandemic shock, with collaboration functioning throughout as a catalytic mechanism.

Recovery. Non-governmental organisations demonstrated resilience through recovery, defined as the restoration of service capacity to pre-pandemic levels accompanied by the consolidation of relational capital. This trajectory does not indicate the absence of change but rather a return to operational functionality enriched by strengthened inter-organisational trust accumulated during the crisis.

One coordinator articulated the principle guiding post-pandemic collaboration: “We have no competition, and what matters is that each beneficiary receives what they need.” (NGO coordinator, integrated services, Phase II interview, 2026)

A secondary empirical element supporting this trajectory is the documented expansion of post-pandemic socialisation services: “The group doubled compared to before – people felt the need for contact after the isolation.” (NGO Coordinator, integrated services, Phase II interview, 2026)

In this case, recovery does not represent a simple return to the status quo but rather a restoration of functional capacity supported by enhanced relational resources.

Transformation. The Prefecture institution illustrates resilience through transformation, identified in this study as the rarest and structurally most consequential trajectory. Here, crisis-induced coordination practices were retained and reconfigured as transferable institutional capacities.

A representative described the pandemic retrospectively as a form of institutional rehearsal: “When the refugee crisis came, we knew exactly what to do.” (Representative, public coordination institution, Phase II interview, 2026) It should be noted that the Prefecture institution’s permanent legal mandate already includes responsibility for coordinating urgent state intervention at the territorial level: under Law no. 340/2004 on the institution of the prefect, the prefect chairs the County Committee for Emergency Situations, a standing coordinating role that predates and is independent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The transformation trajectory documented here therefore builds on – rather than departs from – this pre-existing legal mandate. It is important to note that the 2022 refugee crisis is referenced here strictly as evidence of the transfer and reactivation of coordination capacities built during the pandemic, not as a second object of empirical analysis in its own right: the interviews and documentary sources analysed in this article concern the actors’ collaboration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, and the refugee crisis is treated as an external validation point for the durability of the capacities described, arising in a different institutional and geopolitical context that falls outside the scope of the present study’s research questions.

This interpretation is consistent with documentary evidence from 2020, in which the institution defined itself as: “a catalyst between local public authorities and the other structures on the front line,” while attributing successful crisis management explicitly to inter-institutional and interpersonal cooperation. The intention to convert crisis experience into long-term institutional capacity was formulated explicitly: “We will continue to identify development opportunities that will make us better prepared in the future when facing similar situations.” (Coordinator of pandemic coordination, Cluj County Prefecture institution, Phase I interview, 2020)

Transformation, in this context, represents not merely the persistence of collaborative practices but their integration into the institutional repertoire as reusable governance infrastructure.

Legitimised Reversibility. The Directorate for Social and Medical Assistance (DASM Cluj-Napoca) illustrates legitimised reversibility, a trajectory characterised by the structured discontinuation of emergency-phase collaborations following the end of the crisis.

A representative articulated this logic clearly: “The emergency passed, and it was natural for the collaborations associated with it to end as well. Services reorganised to normal parameters, back to pre-pandemic volumes.” (DASM Cluj-Napoca Coordinator, Phase II interview, 2026)

This trajectory should not be interpreted as a failure of institutional capacity or commitment. Rather, it reflects a structural consequence of the institution's operational mandate. Reversion to established routines is perceived internally as consistent with organisational mission and service logic.

Importantly, reversion was not total. A second institutional voice highlighted the persistence of selected capacities: "What we feel has remained is digitalisation – the need to communicate without travelling. Not at that level, but it has stayed." (DASM Cluj-Napoca Coordinator, Phase II interview, 2026)

This nuance indicates that even within trajectories of formal discontinuity, partial institutional sedimentation of technical and relational capacities can occur.

Latent Resilience. Informal civic initiatives illustrate latent resilience, defined as the preservation of relational and operational capacities without formal institutionalisation. Although these platforms did not evolve into permanent organisational structures, their underlying networks remained available for reactivation.

A coordinator described this characteristic explicitly: "The informal network remains latent and can be activated in other contexts whenever a new need arises." (Coordinator, civic medical assistance initiative, Phase II interview, 2026)

The absence of formal institutionalisation does not imply the disappearance of capacity, a distinction that differentiates latent resilience from other trajectories. The most direct empirical illustration of this pattern is the reactivation of the civic solidarity platform in 2022, during the Ukrainian refugee crisis, two years after the end of its pandemic activity: "We regrouped immediately – people knew each other, the informal structures were intact." (Representative, public coordination institution, Phase II interview, 2026)

Institutional documentation supports this interpretation. Internal Report no. 809/2020 (Direcția de Asistență Socială și Medicală Cluj-Napoca, 2020) confirms that civic initiatives functioned as active partners within pandemic coordination structures, their formal nomination constituting an institutional recognition of an otherwise informal capacity.

Cross-cutting Element: Documentation as a Structural Differentiator. A cross-cutting mechanism observed across trajectories concerns the role of documentation practices in shaping post-pandemic institutional outcomes. Organisations that systematically documented crisis-response practices retained access to operational knowledge and procedural memory. In contrast, organisations lacking systematic documentation faced the risk of losing previously developed capacities.

One coordinator articulated this vulnerability – the absence of any record of what had worked and what had not – directly: "We did not write down anywhere what has worked. If new people come along, they have to start from scratch." (NGO Coordinator, Phase II interview, 2025)

This finding highlights documentation not merely as an administrative activity but as a structural mechanism of institutional learning, shaping the persistence or erosion of institutional capacity.

Integrative Statement – The four trajectories identified, recovery, transformation, legitimised reversibility, and latent resilience, do not represent alternative forms of collaboration but distinct patterns of institutional adaptation generated by the same pandemic shock. Across all trajectories, collaboration functioned consistently as a catalytic mechanism rather than as an outcome in itself. This integrative observation provides the conceptual bridge to the interpretative analysis developed in the following section.

4. DISCUSSION

This section interprets the empirical findings in dialogue with the integrated theoretical framework, following the Grounded Theory logic oriented toward explaining mechanisms – what has worked, what hasn't, and why – rather than merely describing patterns. A necessary terminological clarification guides this interpretation: in the present study, inter-institutional collaboration is not conceptualised as an outcome in itself but as an explanatory mechanism of resilience, contributing to the emergence of differentiated forms of institutional adaptation.

4.1. ADAPTIVE CROSS-SECTORAL COORDINATION AS AN EXPLANATORY MECHANISM

The findings support the formulation of an explanatory mechanism designated as adaptive cross-sectoral coordination. This mechanism describes how collaboration, under crisis conditions, is rapidly activated through the mobilisation of latent relational capital, while the degree of post-crisis institutionalisation depends primarily on actors' structural positions rather than on the intensity of collaboration during the acute phase.

When interpreted through the lens of collaborative governance theory (Ansell & Gash, 2008), the empirical material from Cluj-Napoca confirms the importance of initial conditions, relational history, and prior collaboration experience. These elements facilitated rapid coordination and reduced the transaction costs typically associated with inter-institutional cooperation during emergencies.

However, the findings challenge a widely held implicit assumption within collaborative governance literature – namely, that intensive collaboration necessarily produces durable institutional outcomes. The model proposed here introduces a critical structural dimension: the actor's mandate and position within the institutional field condition the trajectory of post-crisis institutionalisation. In this sense, collaboration functions as a catalyst, but structural positioning determines the durability of its effects.

4.2. INSTITUTIONAL PRESSURES AND THE DEPTH OF CHANGE

The pandemic generated a simultaneous convergence of coercive, mimetic, and normative institutional pressures. Yet the empirical analysis demonstrates that the type of pressure alone does not sufficiently explain the depth of institutional change observed across actors.

Coercive pressures produced rapid compliance but were often associated with temporary adjustments rather than long-term institutional transformation. Mimetic pressures, particularly those involving the replication of perceived successful practices, proved more closely associated with durable institutionalisation processes. Normative pressures – such as professional expectations and shared standards – contributed to behavioural alignment but showed limited effectiveness in sustaining institutional memory under conditions of constrained resources. It should be noted that the non-governmental organisations included in this study are accredited social service providers under Law no. 34/1998, operating under formal licensing and quality-standard requirements; this accreditation status is itself a plausible structural source of the normative pressures observed, since accredited providers are already embedded in a shared professional and regulatory framework prior to any pandemic-specific collaboration.

The recurrent difficulty in consolidating institutional memory, particularly in organisations lacking systematic documentation practices, illustrates the limits of normative isomorphism in resource-constrained environments. These findings suggest that institutional resilience cannot be explained solely through the typology of pressures but must also incorporate structural and organisational capacity factors.

4.3. INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE AS AN ASYMMETRIC RESPONSE

One of the central theoretical contributions of this article lies in the empirical demonstration that institutional resilience exhibits a structurally asymmetric character. The same pandemic shock produced fundamentally different trajectories of adaptation – not primarily as a function of organisational competence or willingness, but as a consequence of actors' structural positions within the institutional field.

The concept of legitimised reversibility, identified in the case of DASM Cluj-Napoca, highlights a form of institutional adaptation that remains underexplored in existing literature. Within this trajectory, reversion to pre-crisis operational modes is not interpreted as institutional failure but as a structurally appropriate response aligned with the organisation's operational mandate.

This observation carries important implications for public policy design. Not all institutions are structurally oriented toward transformation, and attempts to impose uniform expectations of change may produce unintended inefficiencies.

Recognising differentiated institutional mandates allows for more realistic expectations regarding resilience pathways and policy outcomes.

4.4. INSTITUTIONALISATION THROUGH MISSION EXTENSION

The case of the Cluj Prefecture institution supports the formulation of a second mechanism: institutionalisation through mission extension, understood here as an extension in scope and intensity of an already-existing legal mandate (Law no. 340/2004) rather than the acquisition of an entirely new one. Unlike institutionalisation through routinisation – where practices become stabilised through repetition – this mechanism involves a cognitive reframing of crisis experiences as transferable institutional resources.

In this trajectory, coordination infrastructures developed during the pandemic were not limited to a singular emergency context but were incorporated into the institutional repertoire as reusable capacities. The reuse of coordination frameworks during subsequent crises, such as refugee response operations, illustrates how mission expansion can function as a pathway to medium-term institutional resilience.

This mechanism contributes to a more nuanced understanding of institutional transformation by emphasizing the role of institutional learning – not only as procedural adaptation, but as strategic reframing of institutional identity and scope.

4.5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE THEORY OF COLLABORATION AND RESILIENCE

The analytical framework developed in this study intersects with several ongoing debates within institutional sociology and social policy research. By integrating empirical findings with theoretical interpretation, the article contributes to the literature in three main ways.

First, it demonstrates that collaboration alone is not a sufficient predictor of durable resilience. While collaboration functions as a catalytic mechanism during crises, its long-term institutional effects depend on structural positioning, organisational mandates, and resource availability.

Second, the study introduces the concept of asymmetric resilience as a structural property of institutional fields. Rather than assuming uniform responses to systemic shocks, this concept emphasises differentiated adaptation trajectories shaped by institutional diversity.

Third, the research provides an empirical application of the Collective Impact model (Kania & Kramer, 2011) within the context of a semi-consolidated democracy in Eastern Europe. In doing so, it extends the applicability of this model beyond its original formulation in deliberately planned collaborative initiatives, demonstrating its relevance in emergent, crisis-driven contexts.

5. CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrates that post-pandemic institutional resilience in social services for older people exhibits a structurally asymmetric character. The same pandemic shock generated four distinct trajectories of institutional adaptation – recovery, transformation, legitimised reversibility, and latent resilience – differentiated not by actors' competence or willingness, but by their institutional mandates and structural positions within the institutional field. The analytical model proposed in this article, adaptive cross-sectoral coordination as a mechanism of asymmetric resilience, extends existing resilience typologies (Li, 2026) through the explicit incorporation of a structural dimension.

Beyond documenting institutional responses to COVID-19, this study's contribution is a transferable analytical model for understanding how collaborative capacities evolve after crisis conditions disappear – an explanatory model of institutional learning under asymmetric structural conditions, applicable beyond the pandemic context that occasioned it.

Importantly, the observed asymmetry should not be interpreted as a specific feature of the Romanian institutional context, but rather as a general property of structurally differentiated institutional fields. In systems where actors operate under distinct mandates, resource configurations, and authority structures, exogenous shocks such as pandemics are likely to produce heterogeneous institutional responses. The central contribution of this research lies not merely in documenting such differentiation, but in empirically identifying the mechanism through which it occurs, thereby advancing the explanatory potential of resilience research.

The findings also highlight the significance of collaboration as a catalytic mechanism rather than as an outcome in itself. While collaborative processes played a critical role in enabling rapid mobilisation during the crisis phase, their long-term institutional effects depended on structural conditions that shaped the persistence, transformation, or dissolution of collaborative arrangements. This distinction contributes to a more nuanced understanding of institutional resilience as a process conditioned by structural differentiation rather than uniform adaptive capacity.

Future research directions include extending the analytical framework to multi-municipal comparative studies, testing the proposed model across diverse post-socialist institutional environments, and integrating quantitative components capable of examining the distribution of resilience trajectories at broader systemic levels. Such extensions would allow the evaluation of the model's explanatory robustness across varied governance contexts.

The limitations of this study are acknowledged explicitly. The longitudinal perspective employed does not involve repeated interviews with identical individuals across time but rather follows the evolution of the same institutional field over a seven-year period. Additionally, the relatively limited sample size does not permit statistical generalisation. Instead, the transferability of findings follows

the principle of analytical generalisation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), whereby theoretical insights derived from empirically grounded cases may inform understanding in contexts characterised by comparable structural configurations, relational dynamics, and crisis conditions.

A further limitation concerns the operationalisation of collaboration outcomes. Throughout this article, terms such as positive results, successful crisis management, and measurable outcomes of collaboration are operationalised through institutional and professional indicators – service coverage, response time, and continuity of provision – as documented in institutional reports and reported by professional coordinators. These indicators do not capture the subjective experience or evaluation of older beneficiaries themselves, who were not directly included in the sample. The definition of what counts as a favourable outcome in this study is therefore institutional and professional rather than beneficiary-centred, a limitation directly connected to the absence of older people's perspectives noted above.

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