



Organizational Change in Nonprofit Organizations: A Decade in Review (2014-2024)

Hana Fehrenbach – University of Freiburg, Germany | Marlene Walk – University of Freiburg, Germany | Itay Greenspan – Hebrew University, Israel

Over the past decade, *Voluntas* has published a growing - though still developing - body of work on how nonprofit organizations adapt, transform, and respond to change. In this virtual issue, Fehrenbach, Walk, and Greenspan take stock of what organizational change research within the journal has looked like over the past ten years (2014–2024).

Their review identifies a set of articles explicitly focused on change and highlights two dominant perspectives in the literature: (1) nonprofits reacting to external pressures from their institutional environments, and (2) internal transformation processes shaped by evolving structures, strategies, and practices.

By mapping these contributions, the authors show that organizational change has become an increasingly relevant topic in nonprofit research - one that bridges nonprofit studies with broader debates in organizational theory, strategy, and institutional change.

[#Change](#) [#Transformation](#) [#OrganizationalChange](#) [#NonprofitLeadership](#)

Background

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Context



- To capture **contemporary developments on organizational change**, the authors conducted a **systematic review of *Voluntas* publications from 2014 to 2024**. Using “change” as the primary search term in titles and abstracts ensured a broad and inclusive starting point that captured any article engaging substantively with organizational change.
- The initial search produced 15 potentially relevant articles, which were then screened through a multi-step process and led to the final selection of **eight papers that directly examined nonprofit organizational change**.
- The resulting set of articles reflects diverse organizational contexts, change processes, and methodological approaches, providing a representative overview of how *Voluntas* scholarship has conceptualized and studied organizational change over the past decade.
- Across these eight studies, **two key perspectives** emerge:
 - (1) **organizational change as a response to exogenous demands and external pressures**
 - (2) **internal transformations driven by shifting structures, identities, and practices**

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Take aways & Learnings



(1) Organizational Change as a Response to External Pressures

- **Stakeholder resistance:** Change efforts can be slowed or complicated when volunteers or key stakeholders resist new directions → highlights need for clear communication and careful internal change management.
 - **Learning during crisis:** Effective crisis response depends on combining stable structures with flexible practices. Organizations that maintain both variety and redundancy are better positioned to adapt and learn.
 - **Marketization:** Strategic planning and reflective organizational thinking help nonprofits navigate increasing market pressures. Marketization plays out differently across countries and cultures and nonprofits respond differently to state influence.
- **Takeaway:** Flexible structures, clear communication, and strategic thinking help nonprofits manage external demands, especially in contexts shaped by competing institutional logics.

(2) Organizational Transformation Driven by Internal Dynamics

- **Shifting organizational identities:** Professionalization often reshapes how nonprofits understand their identity, legitimacy, and governance, especially when moving from value-driven origins toward more formalized practices.
 - **Formalization and structural evolution:** As organizations grow, they tend to develop clearer structures, leadership roles, and accountability systems. These internal shifts influence how work is coordinated and how decisions are made.
 - **Internal dilemmas:** Change is shaped by how staff and volunteers interpret and negotiate shifts. Emotional tensions, conflicting logics, and day-to-day sensemaking play a key role in how change unfolds.
- **Takeaway:** Internal transformation requires attention to identity, leadership structures, and staff experiences—how people make sense of change often determines whether it takes hold.

CONCLUSION

- **Future research:** Stronger theoretical grounding and more robust methods are needed (e.g., longitudinal and comparative designs).
- Nonprofits must **balance external pressures with internal shifts**, making flexible structures, strategic reflection, and attention to people essential for effective change.

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2026/2 is published in March 2026 and has been written by Silvia Fierăscu – Department of Communication Sciences, West University of Timisoara, Timisoara, Romania. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.