CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT AS A VALUE CO-CREATION STRATEGY IN NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This paper analyses consumer empowerment as a value co-creation strategy in non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although empowerment and co-creation have been widely studied in business and marketing, their relevance to NGOs remains insufficiently addressed. This paper draws on a review of academic literature to examine four key dimensions of empowerment: informational, participatory, psychological, and technological. These dimensions are discussed in relation to their potential to strengthen transparency, trust, and social value creation within NGOs. The analysis underscores the limited attention to empowerment practices in the nonprofit sector and suggests the need for further theoretical and empirical research in this field.

Keywords: consumer empowerment, value co-creation, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), dimensions of empowerment.

Introduction

Relevance of the topic. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) occupy a central place in modern society. They often address social, economic, and environmental challenges that neither state institutions nor the private sector can resolve effectively. Their unique position allows them to leverage community engagement and specialized expertise to foster impactful change (Babu et al., 2020). According to Romero and Abril (2023), NGOs make significant contributions to addressing issues that require community-oriented approaches. Bodi (2024) emphasizes their growing role in meeting societal needs when other actors fail to do so. Their activities are guided by a social mission focused on the public good, which makes them important drivers of social innovation and civil society development (Brandsen & Karré, 2011).

In recent decades, technological change, digitalization, and the increasing involvement of citizens in organizational processes have transformed expectations of how NGOs operate. Based on the arguments of Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004), organizations are moving away from hierarchical models toward value co-creation frameworks, in which consumers are not passive recipients of services but active partners. Ranjan and Read (2016) also highlight that consumer participation in decision-making enhances organizational effectiveness, while Vargo and Lusch (2008) stress the importance of co-creation for ensuring long-term sustainability.

Additionally, the concept of consumer empowerment is particularly relevant in this context. Fuchs, Prandelli, and Schreier (2010) describe empowerment as the process by which individuals or groups gain the ability to influence decisions that affect their services or participation in organizational activities. This paradigm shift elevates consumer empowerment to a critical component, transforming beneficiaries into active participants in generating value rather than mere recipients (Huopalainen & Satama, 2019). In the case of NGOs, empowerment can take multiple forms, such as involving community members in the design of services or engaging volunteers and donors in strategic planning. According to Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz (2013), empowerment serves not only as a managerial approach but also as a social strategy that fosters transparency, trust, and stronger community ties. In general, consumer empowerment deepens active participation, enabling consumers to shape services and products to their needs, a phenomenon increasingly recognized in marketing and organizational research as influencing satisfaction and search behavior (Nam, 2021). Thus, this topic is not only important for analyzing how NGOs can create greater value through empowered consumer participation, but it also fulfils current scholarly criteria for significance.

Research problem. While consumer empowerment and value co-creation are well-established concepts in business and marketing, their application within NGOs remains underexplored. Existing literature rarely provides a rigorous theoretical analysis of how consumer empowerment, beyond basic participation, actively contributes to social value creation in NGOs. This gap is significant because empowerment in NGOs is often discussed in terms of practical outcomes, rather than its transformative effects on social relationships, systems, and broader value creation (Shah, 2021).

The subject matter of the research – consumer empowerment as a strategic approach to value co-creation within non-governmental organizations.

Research aim – to conduct a theoretical analysis of consumer empowerment as a value co-creation strategy in non-governmental organizations.

Research objectives:
1. To analyze the theoretical foundations and multidimensional aspects of consumer empowerment and value co-creation, with emphasis on their comparative application in business and non-governmental organizations.
2. To identify and critically evaluate the principal mechanisms and processes of consumer empowerment that are particularly relevant to non-governmental organizations.
3. To highlight existing research gaps and conceptual challenges, and propose future directions for applying consumer empowerment as a value co-creation strategy within NGOs.

Research methods: this paper employs a theoretical literature review to critically examine existing academic research on consumer empowerment and value co-creation. A structured approach was used to identify, organize, and interpret relevant theoretical sources from peer-reviewed journals and scholarly monographs indexed in Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate. Literature selection prioritized theoretical significance over empirical scope, focusing on contributions that advance understanding of empowerment as a mechanism for social and organizational value creation. Specific attention was given to conceptual frameworks, definitional debates, and the evolution of empowerment and co-creation theories in non-governmental contexts.

1. Theoretical Aspects of Consumer Empowerment

The concept of empowerment originates in social psychology and community development studies. According to Rappaport (1987), empowerment is a process that enables individuals and communities to gain greater control over their lives and environment. Later, Rappaport (2004) expanded this view, stressing the importance of collective power in shaping shared outcomes. In organizational studies, empowerment became associated with managerial processes. Conger and Kanungo (1988) described it as a leadership tool that enables employees to act autonomously, while Spreitzer (1995) conceptualized psychological empowerment as comprising four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Zimmerman (2020) further developed the concept in community psychology, framing empowerment as a process that fosters participation, self-confidence, and responsibility for collective decision-making.

In consumer behavior and marketing research, empowerment has become a central element in building relationships with audiences. Fuchs, Prandelli, and Schreier (2010) demonstrated that strategies that empower consumers directly influence product demand by increasing trust and motivation to engage with an organization's offerings. Similarly, Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004) argued that empowered consumers act not only as recipients of services but also as sources of innovation, actively shaping the value creation process. Cova and Dalli (2009) emphasized that empowerment changes the logic of marketing by transforming consumers into active partners, strengthening relationships, and enhancing an organization's reputation.

An important theoretical distinction exists between *enabling* and *empowering*. Espeland and Shanta (2001) noted that enabling refers to providing individuals with tools or opportunities to act, while empowering means granting them absolute authority and responsibility for decisions. Organizations may limit themselves to enabling by sharing information or resources, yet true empowerment occurs only when decision-making power is transferred to consumers. This distinction is especially relevant in

NGOs, where the depth of empowerment determines whether consumer involvement remains symbolic or becomes genuinely influential.

Digitalization further reinforces the significance of empowerment. Recent studies suggest that digital platforms, social networks, and artificial intelligence are opening new opportunities for consumers to influence organizational decisions and contribute to real-time value creation (Feng & Sun, 2025). These technologies reshape communication channels and the logic of interaction between organizations and their audiences, providing consumers with new ways to express their expectations, share experiences, and initiate change. Thus, digital platforms and tools offer easier access to information, greater choice, and more opportunities to interact with organizations, enabling consumers to make informed, autonomous decisions and influence organizational actions.

In summary, the concept of consumer empowerment has expanded over several decades. From an early focus on individual psychological power, it has evolved into a complex managerial and marketing strategy applicable to both for-profit and nonprofit organizations. Classic studies by Rappaport, Zimmerman, Spreitzer, and Conger and Kanungo laid the foundation, while more recent work (Fuchs, Prandelli, & Schreier, 2010; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Belharar & Chakor, 2020; Feng & Sun, 2025; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013) illustrates the role of empowerment in co-creation, digitalization, and community engagement. While definitions vary, typical components include consumer ability, capacity, competency, opportunity, and agency within organizations, leading to effective choices and advocacy (Nam, 2021).

2. Theoretical Aspects of Value Co-Creation

The concept of value co-creation, where consumers actively participate in the development and delivery of services, has gained significant traction across various disciplines, including the social sciences and business studies (Pearce, Maple, Shakeshaft, Wayland, and McKay, 2020). Traditionally, value was understood as the output created by an organization and passively consumed by its clients. According to Rösler et al. (2021), this perspective has shifted toward an interactive view, in which value emerges from the joint integration of resources, knowledge, and experiences among organizations and consumers. From a theoretical perspective, value co-creation posits that value is not generated unilaterally by organizations for consumers; rather, it is a collaborative process in which both organizations and consumers contribute to its creation. Instead, it is a collaborative phenomenon arising from the synergistic integration of resources, knowledge, and experiences contributed by both parties.

In nonprofit and public-sector contexts, value co-creation takes on a broader meaning. Maijala et al. (2024) argue that for NGOs, value cannot be separated from their social impact. Co-creation in this sector, therefore, extends beyond economic outcomes to encompass social responsibility, inclusiveness, and trust. Priem (2007) also emphasizes that innovation plays a critical role in increasing consumers' perceived value, while Ramaswamy (2004, 2020) highlights the dynamic nature of co-creation, in which consumers become active partners in shaping both innovation and decision-making processes.

Additionally, the importance of consumer participation has been repeatedly confirmed in the literature. Suk, Li, and Hwang (2023) demonstrate that active involvement strengthens the relationship between consumers and organizations. In contrast, Quach, Shao, Ross, and Thaichon (2019) observe that engaged consumers are more likely to disseminate information, discuss organizational activities, and encourage others to participate. This behavior has direct effects on both organizational reputation and service outcomes.

Furthermore, digitalization further expands opportunities for value co-creation. According to Hussain (2022), social media and digital platforms provide spaces where consumers can evaluate services, propose ideas, and even influence strategic directions. Such forms of engagement not only enhance communication but also help NGOs build trust and identify new ways of creating social value together with their communities.

A widely cited framework in co-creation theory is the DART model developed by Ramaswamy and Prahalad (2004). It emphasizes four essential dimensions of interaction: dialogue, access, risk assessment, and transparency. Dialogue ensures continuous two-way communication; access provides

consumers with the resources and information they need; risk assessment involves sharing responsibility for outcomes; and transparency strengthens trust. These principles remain highly relevant for NGOs as they seek to engage their stakeholders more meaningfully. In general, this collaborative approach facilitates organizational innovation, reinforces stakeholder relationships, and generates greater perceived value for all parties involved. Beyond the DART model, other scholars underline the significance of knowledge sharing and critical reflection in the co-creation process. Pearce, Maple, Shakeshaft, Wayland, and McKay (2020) suggest that effective co-creation requires not only open communication but also the collective development of new knowledge, particularly in community-based organizations.

Despite these theoretical advances, the literature still provides limited evidence on how co-creation is practically implemented in NGOs. Most empirical studies focus on business or public sector organizations, while the nonprofit sector remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need for further conceptual and empirical studies on how NGOs employ co-creation practices across various fields, including social services, culture, youth initiatives, and environmental protection, and how these practices contribute to sustainability and the creation of long-term social value.

3. Key Dimensions of Consumer Empowerment in NGOs

Scholars highlight several dimensions of empowerment that are particularly relevant to the functioning of non-governmental organizations (Belharar & Chakor, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020; Ind, Iglesias, & Schultz, 2013; Feng & Sun, 2025). These dimensions help explain how empowerment extends beyond managerial practices and becomes a social strategy that fosters trust, engagement, and long-term community value. Based on theoretical analysis key dimensions where identified (see Table 1).

Table 1. Key dimensions and indicators of consumer empowerment in NGOs

Dimension	Example in NGOs	NGO context	Key insights	References and representative studies
Informational	Transparency in donation usage	Partial	Increases knowledge and agency of stakeholders	Nam (2021); Sharma et al. (2025)
Participatory	Volunteer-driven decision-making committees	Yes	Strengthens engagement and ownership in NGOs	Kini & Basri (2023); Krasniqi (2024)
Psychological	Confidence-building empowerment programs	Partial	Builds trust and sustained involvement	Gurtner et al. (2024); Han & Broniarczyk (2022)
Technological	Online activism and digital feedback platforms	Limited	Technology enables broader co-creation and transparency	Kim & Choi (2019); Han & Broniarczyk (2022)

Source: created by authors based on Kim & Choi (2019); Nam (2021); Han & Broniarczyk (2022); Kini & Basri (2023); Krasniqi (2024); Gurtner et al. (2024); Sharma et al. (2025).

Informational dimension. The starting point of empowerment lies in access to transparent, relevant, and timely information. According to Belharar and Chakor (2020), informed consumers are better able to collaborate with organizations and make meaningful contributions to decision-making. Information transparency also reduces power asymmetries and strengthens trust. In digital environments, as Feng and Sun (2025) observe, access to reliable information directly affects the quality of co-creation and motivates consumers to engage more actively.

Participatory dimension. Empowerment requires consumers not only to receive services but also to participate in shaping them. Participation may include involvement in service design, contribution to strategic discussions, or engagement in organizational governance. According to Voorberg, Bekkers, and Tummers (2015), public and nonprofit organizations that adopt participatory approaches commit to sharing both resources and responsibility for results. Similarly, Powell, Dalton, Lawrence, and Perkins (2024) describe co-creation as a collaborative activity in which organizations and individuals jointly define community needs and seek solutions to address them. In NGOs, such practices strengthen civic engagement and solidarity.

Psychological dimension. Empowerment also depends on individuals' subjective experiences. Zimmerman (2020) emphasizes that psychological empowerment enhances self-esteem, confidence, and

a sense of control. In nonprofit settings, Ind, Iglesias, and Schultz (2013) argue that this dimension extends beyond the individual, as participation in co-creation fosters community belonging and social capital. Psychological empowerment, therefore, plays a crucial role in sustaining long-term commitment and loyalty to the organization.

Technological dimension. Advances in digital technologies create new possibilities for empowerment that transcend traditional forms of participation. According to Feng and Sun (2025), artificial intelligence, virtual communities, and social networks expand consumers' ability to influence organizational decisions, personalize services, and collaborate in real time. These tools enable NGOs to engage broader audiences, increase responsiveness, and enhance the effectiveness of their activities.

In summary, these four dimensions work together to create a holistic empowerment framework suitable for NGOs aiming to enhance social value creation and organizational effectiveness. The informational dimension provides the foundation for participation; participatory practices ensure active involvement; psychological empowerment reinforces confidence and motivation; and technological tools open new channels for collaboration. Understanding these interconnected elements is crucial for NGOs seeking to enhance consumer engagement and generate sustainable social value. Additionally, as shown in Figure 1, these dimensions are positioned to cultivate heightened stakeholder engagement, amplify social impact, and foster sustainable value creation. The core conceptualization of this strategy involves implementing consumer empowerment through the DART model, which is synergistically integrated with four key dimensions: Independent Variables (Informational dimension, Participatory dimension, Psychological dimension, Technological dimension); Process / Mediating Mechanism (the DART Model serves as the foundational framework, mediating empowerment through its constituent elements of Dialogue, Access, Risk-sharing, and Transparency); Outcomes / Dependent Variables (enhanced stakeholder satisfaction, trust, and loyalty; Increased organizational innovation and adaptability; Strengthened community cohesion and alignment with a shared mission; Improved organizational credibility and a heightened customer-centric orientation).
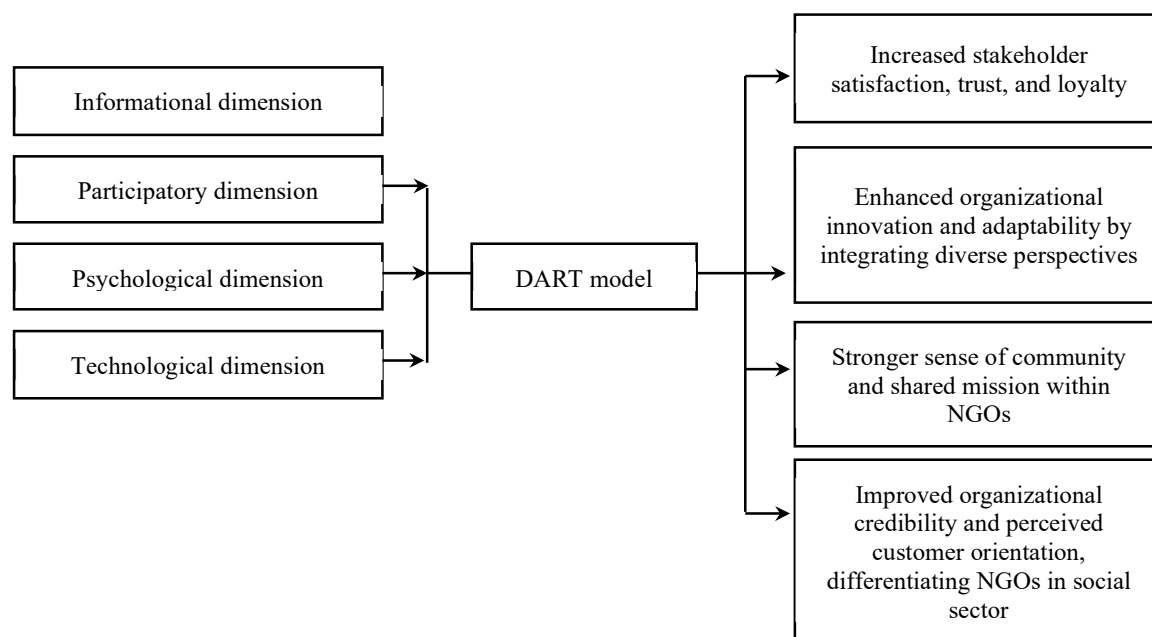

Figure 1. Conceptual model - Implementing consumer empowerment through the DART model and four dimensions
Source: created by authors

This integrated approach positions NGOs to transition beneficiaries from passive recipients to active collaborators, fostering a dynamic environment for shared inventiveness and joint production of services (Akter et al., 2021). This paradigm shift fundamentally alters the power dynamics within the NGO-beneficiary relationship, fostering a more equitable and effective model for addressing complex

social challenges. Specifically, the DART model provides a structured framework for NGOs to systematically integrate these dimensions, fostering deep customer engagement and influencing perception through active co-creation (Solakis et al., 2021; Ortíz et al., 2023).

Conclusion

This theoretical review examined consumer empowerment as a value co-creation strategy in non-governmental organizations. The analysis of theoretical approaches to consumer empowerment and value co-creation across sectors revealed that these concepts are well established in business and marketing research, where they are linked to consumer engagement, innovation, and service quality. In contrast, their application in the nonprofit sector remains less developed, with limited exploration of how empowerment contributes to organizational sustainability and social value creation. The review identified the main mechanisms of consumer empowerment relevant to NGOs. Four key dimensions were highlighted: informational, participatory, psychological, and technological. Together, these dimensions provide a comprehensive understanding of how NGOs can engage their stakeholders not only as service recipients but also as active partners in value creation.

Overall, this paper highlights a conceptual gap and challenges in applying consumer empowerment as a value co-creation strategy within NGOs. This gap underscores the need for further theoretical development and more empirical studies that focus specifically on empowerment within NGO contexts. Therefore, future research should investigate the specific contextual factors within NGOs that mediate the effectiveness of different empowerment dimensions in fostering value co-creation (Best et al., 2018).

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VARTOTOJŲ ĮGALINIMAS KAIP VERTĖS BENDRAKŪROS STRATEGIJA NEVYRIAUSYBINĖSE ORGANIZACIJOSE

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Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjama vartotojų įgalinimo samprata (angl. *Consumer empowerment*) kaip vertės bendrakūros kūrimo strategija nevyriausybinėse organizacijose (NVO). Šios organizacijos užima svarbią vietą šiuolaikinėje visuomenėje. Jos dažnai sprendžia socialinius, ekonominius ir aplinkosauginius iššūkius, kurių tiek valstybės institucijos, tiek privatus sektorius nepajėgia efektyviai įveikti. Dėl savo unikalios pozicijos NVO geba sutelkti bendruomenes, pasitelkti specializuotus gebėjimus ir inicijuoti pokyčius, turinčius ilgalaikį poveikį. NVO ypač prisideda sprendžiant problemas, kurioms būtini bendruomeniniai, į žmones orientuoti sprendimai. Autoriai pabrėžia, kad šių organizacijų vaidmuo tampa vis svarbesnis ten, kur kiti veikėjai nesugeba patenkinti visuomenės poreikių. Kadangi jų veikla grindžiama socialine misija ir orientacija į viešąjį gėrį, NVO tampa reikšmingais socialinių inovacijų ir pilietinės visuomenės stiprinimo varikliais. Nors

vartotojų įgalinimas ir vertės bendrakūra plačiai aptarti mokslinėje literatūroje, plačiai naudojami versle, jų taikymas NVO sektoriuje tebėra fragmentiškas ir reikalaujantis gilesnio teorinio pagrindimo. Atsižvelgiant į tai, šiame straipsnyje siekiama išplėsti supratimą apie tai, kaip įgalinimas gali sustiprinti suinteresuotųjų grupių dalyvavimą, organizacijų skaidrumą, pasitikėjimą ir socialinės vertės kūrimą.

Klasikiniai vartotojų įgalinimo tyrimai parodė, kad suteikdamos vartotojams daugiau galios priimti sprendimus ar prisidėti prie paslaugų kūrimo, organizacijos skatina didesnę motyvaciją ir lojalumą. Verslo kontekste įgalinti vartotojai tampa ne tik paslaugų gavėjais, bet ir inovacijų šaltiniais, aktyviai dalyvaujančiais vertės kūrimo procesuose. Ši logika palaipsniui perkelta ir į NVO sektorių, kuriame vartotojai (bendruomenių nariai, savanoriai, donorai, paslaugų gavėjai) gali prisidėti ne tik prie paslaugų formavimo, bet ir prie organizacijos misijos įgyvendinimo, socialinių problemų sprendimo ar inovacijų inicijavimo.

Skaitmenizacija dar labiau sustiprino įgalinimo reikšmę. Skaitmeninės platformos, socialiniai tinklai ir dirbtinio intelekto sprendimai suteikia vartotojams naujų įsitraukimo galimybių, kurios leidžia greičiau keistis informacija, pateikti grįžtamąjį ryšį, dalyvauti konsultacijose ir daryti realią įtaką organizacijų sprendimams. Tokios priemonės didina skaidrumą ir tampa svarbiu komunikacijos tinklu, per kurį NVO gali stiprinti savo reputaciją, atskaitomybę ir bendruomenės pasitikėjimą.

Remiantis atlikta literatūros analize, straipsnyje išskiriamos keturios vartotojų įgalinimo dimensijos, kurios turi ypatingą reikšmę NVO kontekste: informacinė, dalyvavimo, psichologinė ir technologinė. Informacinė dimensija pabrėžia, kad skaidri, suprantama ir prieinama informacija yra įgalinimo pagrindas. Tik informuoti vartotojai gali priimti pagrįstus sprendimus, kritiškai vertinti organizacijų veiklą ir aktyviai dalyvauti bendrakūroje. Dalyvavimo dimensija atskleidžia, kad įgalinimas yra ne vien paslaugų gavimas, bet ir galimybė dalyvauti kuriant sprendimus, paslaugas ar organizacijos strategijas. Dalyvavimas gali reikštis konsultacijomis, bendradarbiavimu, savanoryste ar įtraukimu į sprendimų priėmimo procesus. Psichologinė dimensija akcentuoja vidines vartotojo nuostatas, tokias kaip pasitikėjimas savimi, kompetencijos jausmas ir suvokiama įtaka. Vartotojai, jaučiantys, kad jų įsitraukimas yra prasmingas ir daro poveikį, linkę aktyviau bendradarbiauti, ilgiau išlikti lojalūs ir įsitraukę. Technologinė dimensija išryškina skaitmeninių įrankių gebėjimą išplėsti įgalinimo formas, leidžiančias NVO pasiekti platesnes auditorijas, rinkti įžvalgas realiu laiku ir kurti interaktyvias bendrakūros praktikas.

Siekiant integruoti šias keturias dimensijas į nuoseklią vartotojų įgalinimo sistemą, straipsnyje remiamasi DART modeliu, apimančiu dialogą, prieigą, rizikos pasidalijimą ir skaidrumą. Dialogas leidžia kurti dvišalius ryšius, prieiga suteikia vartotojams reikiamą informaciją ir resursus, rizikos pasidalijimas stiprina partnerystę, o skaidrumas didina pasitikėjimą. Straipsnyje pasiūlyta konceptuali schema paaiškina, kaip DART modelis veikia kaip tarpinis mechanizmas, jungiantis keturias įgalinimo dimensijas su galutiniais rezultatais: didesniu suinteresuotųjų šalių pasitenkinimu, organizacijų inovatyvumu, stipresne bendruomenių sanglauda ir tvirtesne NVO reputacija.

Apibendrinant, straipsnis atskleidžia, kad vartotojų įgalinimas NVO sektoriuje yra kompleksinis reiškinys, įgaunantis tiek vadybinį, tiek socialinį pobūdį. Vis dėlto literatūros analizė rodo akivaizdžią spragą tyrimų trukume, kurie sistemingai analizuotų, kaip skirtingos įgalinimo dimensijos veikia bendrakūros procesus NVO veikloje. Todėl būtini tolimesni tyrimai, siekiant suprasti specifinius NVO kontekstus, kuriuose įgalinimas gali labiausiai prisidėti prie socialinės vertės kūrimo ir tvarios organizacijų plėtros.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: vartotojų įgalinimas, vertės bendrakūra, nevyriausybinės organizacijos (NVO), įgalinimo dimensijos.