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Community based social protection in Palestine and its role in charity and women empowerment in Beita

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Abstract

Poverty and unemployment remain major socio-economic challenges in Palestine, shaped by structural constraints, limited economic opportunities, and ongoing socio-political instability. Community-based organizations play a crucial role in addressing these issues through social protection, relief, and empowerment initiatives. This study compares the roles of the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society in tackling poverty and unemployment in Beita. Using a qualitative design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 participants, including institutional representatives and beneficiaries. Findings show that the Zakat Committee contributes primarily to short-term poverty alleviation through financial, food, and medical assistance, while the Women Development Society promotes long-term empowerment through training, income-generating activities, and support for women's entrepreneurship. Despite these contributions, both approaches remain constrained by structural barriers, including limited employment opportunities and weak local markets. The study proposes a hybrid model integrating relief and empowerment to enhance resilience and achieve sustainable poverty reduction.

Keywords Community-based organizations, Empowerment, Palestine, Poverty reduction, Social protection, Unemployment, Women's entrepreneurship

1 Introduction

Poverty and unemployment remain among the most pressing socio-economic challenges in Palestine, shaped by a complex interplay of political instability, restricted economic mobility, and structural inequalities. These conditions are further intensified by the realities of occupation, including movement restrictions, economic dependency, and limited access to formal labor markets [14]. As a result, access to stable employment opportunities remains highly constrained, particularly for vulnerable groups such as women and low-income households.

In such contexts, alternative livelihood strategies become essential for survival. Emerging evidence suggests that individuals increasingly rely on informal and



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community-based mechanisms to cope with economic hardship [12, 32]. Informal economic activities—including home-based and micro-enterprises—often function as adaptive responses to labor market exclusion and structural constraints [3, 16]. These dynamics are particularly evident in conflict-affected and economically fragile settings, where entrepreneurship is frequently necessity-driven rather than opportunity-driven [11]. Among these strategies, civil society organizations (CSOs) and local charitable institutions play a critical role in providing social protection and supporting vulnerable populations, particularly where formal welfare systems are limited [21]. However, resilience itself is not a universal or fixed trait; rather, it is shaped by cultural and contextual factors, with global and locally specific aspects interacting in complex ways [35].

At the global level, poverty reduction is central to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty), which is closely linked to Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals). These frameworks emphasize the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration involving governments, civil society, and local actors in addressing poverty and promoting inclusive development (United Nations 2015). In Palestine, where structural constraints limit formal economic opportunities, such community-based initiatives are particularly significant.

Within this context, women are disproportionately affected by poverty and unemployment due to the intersection of gender norms, socio-cultural expectations, and labor market inequalities (Omran 2023; [30]). These overlapping constraints restrict women's participation in the formal economy and limit their access to resources and opportunities. Consequently, many women turn to alternative forms of economic participation, particularly home-based entrepreneurship, as a necessity-driven strategy for income generation and survival. Recent scholarship further highlights that women's entrepreneurship in informal contexts operates along a continuum between necessity and opportunity, shaped by structural inequalities and limited institutional support [1, 33].

Beita, a town in the Nablus governorate located approximately 15 km southeast of Nablus, provides a compelling context for examining these dynamics. Beyond its demographic characteristics, Beita occupies a strategically significant geopolitical position in the northern West Bank, particularly due to its proximity to agricultural lands and key transit routes [15, 22]. In recent years, the town has become a focal point of grassroots resistance, especially following the establishment of the illegal Evyatar outpost on Mount Sabih (Jabal Sbeih), a site of both agricultural and strategic importance [23]. These developments have intensified socio-economic pressures by restricting access to land, disrupting agricultural livelihoods, and limiting economic mobility. Such dynamics are consistent with broader patterns of environmental and infrastructural disruption in the occupied Palestinian territories [25, 31]. As a result, poverty and unemployment in Beita are closely linked to structural and political constraints rather than purely local economic conditions.

Despite the importance of such institutions, limited research has systematically compared their roles and effectiveness within the same local context. Moreover, the intersection between poverty, unemployment, and women's economic empowerment remains underexplored in Palestine. This study addresses this gap by providing a comparative analysis of these two models, examining their contributions to poverty reduction and unemployment mitigation, and assessing the extent to which empowerment-oriented approaches offer more sustainable outcomes in conflict-affected settings. In doing so,

the study moves beyond examining relief and empowerment as separate domains and instead explores their interrelationship within a single analytical framework.

2 Literature review

2.1 Structural constraints and economic exclusion in Palestine

The Palestinian economy is shaped by structural constraints arising from political instability, occupation, and restricted labor mobility. These conditions significantly limit access to formal employment and contribute to persistent unemployment and poverty [14]. Within such environments, individuals are often compelled to adopt alternative livelihood strategies to sustain their households [12].

Governance structures at both institutional and community levels play a mediating role in shaping how these constraints translate into economic outcomes.

In this regard, Awwad [6] demonstrates that effective governance positively influences the relationship between entrepreneurship and economic growth in Palestine, suggesting that institutional quality can partially offset structural constraints by enabling entrepreneurial activity. Similarly, Awwad et al. [9] emphasize that governance embedded with social responsibility enhances the socio-economic performance of institutions such as the Palestinian Investment Fund, highlighting the importance of accountable governance systems in structurally constrained environments.

2.2 Informal economy and survival strategies

In contexts where formal employment is inaccessible, the informal economy plays a crucial role in absorbing economic shocks and providing income-generating opportunities. Household-based enterprises, in particular, function as a “safety valve” that enables individuals to cope with economic instability and unemployment [18]. These informal activities are especially significant in conflict-affected settings, where economic uncertainty and limited institutional support necessitate adaptive and flexible livelihood strategies.

The sustainability of informal survival strategies is increasingly linked to broader governance and innovation systems. As Awwad [7] argues in the context of sustainability and artificial intelligence applications, governance frameworks combined with technological innovation can create enabling environments for community-based economic activities, particularly relevant for informal entrepreneurs in Palestine.

2.3 Women’s entrepreneurship and economic resilience

Women’s entrepreneurship in Palestine has emerged as a critical mechanism for fostering economic resilience and social participation. However, it is shaped by intersecting systems of constraint, including patriarchy, socio-cultural expectations, and limited access to resources [2, 17, 30]. These factors create a restricted entrepreneurial landscape in which women often engage in small-scale, home-based enterprises that require minimal capital and align with socially acceptable roles.

Such enterprises should not be viewed merely as supplementary income sources but as central mechanisms of survival and resilience [34]. In many cases, women’s entrepreneurial activities are necessity-driven responses to economic exclusion rather than opportunity-driven ventures [4].

Comparative evidence further reinforces this structural interpretation. Awwad and Hamdan [8] show that women’s empowerment through entrepreneurship in Saudi

Arabia depends on structural enablers such as economic diversification and institutional support, conditions that remain limited in Palestine.

2.4 Beyond empowerment: constraints in women's entrepreneurship

Recent scholarship challenges the assumption that entrepreneurship automatically leads to empowerment. Instead, it highlights that women's economic participation is often constrained by structural and institutional barriers [5], including limited access to capital, weak support systems, and restrictive gender norms ([26]; Anderson and Ojediran 2022). As a result, the transformative potential of entrepreneurship remains limited in contexts characterized by inequality and instability.

Within this context, Marsal et al. [27] demonstrate that mentorship and targeted funding significantly enhance entrepreneurial motivation, highlighting the importance of structured support systems for women's economic participation. Similarly, Awwad et al. [10] emphasize that governance quality within institutional boards influences organizational performance and knowledge production, suggesting that governance structures in civil society organizations directly affect their developmental effectiveness.

In Palestine, for instance, the absence of a dedicated legal framework for social entrepreneurship further constrains civil society organizations working on gender-related SDGs [28]. Moreover, while social capital can serve as a critical enabler where institutional support is weak, its benefits are not evenly distributed, as entrepreneurs across Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt continue to face resource limitations and sector-specific challenges [29].

Furthermore, the informal economy should be understood as a continuum between necessity and opportunity, rather than a binary distinction [33]. This perspective is particularly relevant in Palestine, where women's entrepreneurship reflects a complex interplay between resilience, constraint, and adaptation.

2.5 Role of community-based organizations

In response to these challenges, community-based organizations play a critical role in supporting vulnerable populations and facilitating economic participation. These organizations provide both relief-based assistance, such as financial aid and food support, and empowerment-based interventions, including skills training and support for income-generating activities.

The effectiveness of these organizations is increasingly linked to governance structures and institutional accountability mechanisms. Awwad et al. [9] highlight that socially responsible governance frameworks, such as those adopted by the Palestinian Investment Fund, strengthen the developmental role of institutions operating in constrained environments.

Religious institutions, such as Zakat committees, primarily focus on immediate poverty alleviation through redistribution mechanisms. In contrast, development-oriented organizations—particularly women-led associations—emphasize long-term empowerment and capacity building. Rather than operating as isolated or parallel systems, these two institutional logics increasingly interact within the same local context, creating the basis for an integrated social protection approach.

Building on this, Awwad [7] argues that hybrid governance models that integrate immediate relief with long-term capacity building are particularly effective in environments characterized by structural constraints and weak formal welfare systems.

This interaction forms the conceptual foundation of the hybrid model proposed in this study, which reconceptualizes relief and empowerment as interdependent rather than separate or sequential interventions.

2.6 Research gap

While existing literature highlights the importance of both informal economies and community-based organizations in addressing poverty, there is limited research comparing relief-based and empowerment-based approaches within the same local context. Additionally, the relationship between women's entrepreneurship, social protection, and unemployment remains underexplored in Palestine.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society contribute to poverty reduction and employment generation, offering a comparative perspective on their roles, strategies, and effectiveness. In doing so, the study advances the literature by proposing a hybrid model of community-based social protection that conceptualizes relief and empowerment as dynamically interacting components. Unlike existing frameworks that treat them as separate or linear stages, this model emphasizes their cyclical and mutually reinforcing relationship under structurally constrained conditions.

3 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in an integrated theoretical framework that combines Social Protection Theory, Structural Violence Theory, and Empowerment Theory to examine how community-based institutions address poverty and unemployment in Palestine.

First, Social Protection Theory [20] provides a lens for understanding how formal and informal mechanisms support vulnerable populations in contexts of economic insecurity. In settings characterized by limited state capacity, community-based organizations—such as Zakat committees and charitable associations—function as informal social protection systems by delivering essential services, including financial assistance and basic welfare support. This perspective is particularly useful for analyzing the relief-oriented role of the Beita Zakat Committee in mitigating immediate poverty.

Second, Structural Violence Theory [19] contextualizes poverty and unemployment as outcomes of systemic and institutional inequalities rather than purely individual conditions. In the Palestinian context, structural constraints—such as restricted labor mobility, economic dependency, and political instability—limit access to employment and resources. This framework enables the study to situate local interventions within broader socio-political conditions and to explain the persistence of poverty despite ongoing community-based efforts.

Third, Empowerment Theory [24] is employed to examine development-oriented approaches that focus on enhancing individuals' capacities and agency. Empowerment is conceptualized as the expansion of access to resources, decision-making power, and opportunities for socio-economic participation. This perspective is particularly relevant for analyzing the role of the Beita Women Development Society, which emphasizes skills

development and income-generating activities as pathways toward sustainable economic inclusion.

By integrating these three perspectives, this study develops a relational analytical lens in which relief and empowerment are not treated as separate theoretical domains but as interconnected processes embedded within structural conditions. This integration provides the theoretical basis for the hybrid model, which conceptualizes social protection as a dynamic system of interaction rather than a linear sequence of interventions.

4 Methodology

4.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case study design to examine the roles of the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society in addressing poverty and unemployment in Beita, Palestine. A qualitative case study is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of institutional practices, perceived impact, and beneficiaries' lived experiences within a specific socio-economic context. The comparative dimension of the study enables an analysis of two distinct yet complementary models of community-based social protection: a relief-oriented model represented by the Beita Zakat Committee and an empowerment-oriented model represented by the Beita Women Development Society. This design also allows for analytical comparison across institutional logics (relief vs. empowerment), strengthening interpretive depth beyond descriptive accounts.

4.2 Research setting

The study was conducted in Beita, a town in the Nablus governorate in the West Bank, Palestine. Beita provides a relevant setting for this study because it faces conditions of economic hardship, unemployment, and limited formal labor opportunities, while also hosting active community-based institutions engaged in poverty reduction and social support.

4.3 Participants and sampling

The study used purposive sampling to select participants (Table 1) who were directly involved in or affected by the work of the two institutions. The sample included two main categories of participants: institutional representatives and beneficiaries.

The final sample consisted of 12 participants, and data saturation was reached at this number, as no new themes emerged in the final interviews, indicating sufficient depth and redundancy of information.

First, directors or institutional representatives from both the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society were interviewed to provide detailed information about the institutions' goals, programs, strategies, challenges, and perceived impact.

Beneficiaries were selected to reflect the diversity of interventions provided by both institutions. For the Beita Zakat Committee, participants included individuals receiving financial assistance, food aid, medical support, and educational support, representing households experiencing acute economic vulnerability. For the Beita Women Development Society, beneficiaries included women engaged in home-based production and income-generating activities, participants in agricultural and food security programs,

Table 1 Participant profile and sample distribution

Institution	Participant Type	Category	Description	n
Beita Zakat Committee	Beneficiaries	Financial Aid Recipients	Individuals/families receiving direct financial support	2
		Food Aid Beneficiaries	Households receiving food assistance	1
		Medical Support Beneficiaries	Individuals supported for medical treatment	1
		Educational Support Beneficiaries	Students receiving educational aid	1
	Institutional	Director/Staff	Representative of the committee	1
Subtotal (Zakat)				6
Beita Women Development Society	Beneficiaries	Home-Based Production Participants	Women engaged in food/handicraft production	2
		Agricultural Program Beneficiaries	Participants in home gardens/beekeeping	1
		Training Participants	Women/youth in skills development programs	1
		Micro-Enterprise Owners	Beneficiaries running small businesses	1
	Institutional	Director/Staff	Representative of the society	1
Subtotal (Society)				6

trainees in entrepreneurship and skills development initiatives, and youth involved in employment-oriented activities. This diversity allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both relief-based and empowerment-based approaches to poverty reduction and unemployment mitigation. Participants were selected based on their direct experience with the institution, willingness to participate, and ability to provide relevant and detailed information related to the study topic.

Table 1 demonstrates a balanced and purposive sample that includes both institutional representatives and beneficiaries from the two organizations. The distribution reflects the contrast between relief-based interventions (Zakat Committee) and empowerment-based approaches (Women Development Society), while ensuring sufficient diversity to support a meaningful comparative analysis.

4.4 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with directors and beneficiaries from both the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society. A total of 12 participants were interviewed, including institutional representatives and beneficiaries representing different types of interventions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed the researcher to maintain focus on the study objectives while providing participants with the flexibility to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives. Interviews lasted between 22 and 31 min (average $\approx$ 26 min), were conducted either face-to-face or online depending on participant availability, and were carried out in Arabic.

Two interview guides were used. One guide was designed for directors/institutional representatives and focused on issues such as:

- The history and mission of the institution,
- Main poverty-reduction and unemployment-related programs,
- Methods of identifying target groups,
- Evaluation mechanisms,

- Partnerships,
- Challenges,
- And future plans.

A second interview guide was developed for beneficiaries and focused on:

- The type of support received,
- Perceived changes in income or living conditions,
- Experiences with training, aid, or empowerment programs,
- Satisfaction with services,
- And remaining challenges related to poverty or unemployment.

All interviews were audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated from Arabic into English by the researcher. To ensure translation accuracy, transcripts were checked repeatedly against the original recordings. In addition to interviews, institutional documents were used as supplementary data. No formal member checking was conducted; however, clarification questions were used during interviews to ensure accuracy of participant responses.

4.5 Data analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke [13]. The analysis involved repeated reading, coding, theme development, and refinement. Coding was conducted manually without the use of qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo or Atlas.ti), allowing the researcher to remain closely engaged with the data. To ensure analytical consistency, coding was reviewed multiple times and compared across transcripts to maintain coherence in theme development. Initial codes were grouped into candidate themes, which were then refined through iterative comparison across cases and institutions. The analysis was both deductive and inductive.

4.6 Trustworthiness

To enhance the rigor of the study, several strategies were employed. Credibility was strengthened through the inclusion of multiple participant groups, namely directors and beneficiaries from both institutions. Dependability was supported by using a clear interview protocol and systematic thematic analysis. Confirmability was enhanced by grounding the findings in interview data rather than personal assumptions. Transferability was addressed by providing sufficient contextual detail about Beita and the two institutions under study.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their voluntary participation. Informed consent was obtained before the interviews were conducted. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, especially for beneficiaries, and no identifying personal information was disclosed in the reporting of findings.

4.8 Use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools

The study involved the use of commercial generative AI tools (ChatGPT-based systems) solely for language editing, grammar refinement, and translation support from Arabic to English. No AI tools were used for data generation, coding, or interpretation. To ensure

ethical use and accuracy, all AI-assisted outputs were manually reviewed, verified against original transcripts, and edited by the researcher before inclusion in the manuscript.

5 Results

This section presents the findings derived from semi-structured interviews with directors and beneficiaries from both the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society. In line with the study design, the analysis begins with institutional perspectives to establish the objectives, strategies, and operational frameworks of each organization, before moving to beneficiaries' experiences to examine how these interventions are perceived and experienced in practice.

5.1 Institutional perspectives

The findings reveal a clear divergence in institutional orientation between the two organizations. The Beita Zakat Committee operates within a relief-based framework, primarily concerned with addressing immediate needs. As the director explained, “our primary goal is to support families who cannot meet their basic needs” (P1), highlighting a focus on financial assistance, food aid, medical support, and educational contributions. In contrast, the Beita Women Development Society adopts a developmental and empowerment-oriented approach, aiming to enhance women's socio-economic participation. This orientation is reflected in the director's statement that the association seeks “to empower women economically, socially, and culturally and enhance their participation in public life” (P7), emphasizing long-term capacity building rather than short-term relief.

From the perspective of Social Protection Theory, these findings illustrate two distinct but complementary modalities of social protection: a protective (relief-based) model and a promotive (empowerment-based) model. The Zakat Committee functions primarily as a protective mechanism that prevents households from falling deeper into poverty, while the Women Development Society represents a promotive approach aimed at strengthening long-term human and economic capabilities.

This difference becomes more evident when examining the nature of programs implemented by each institution. The Zakat Committee's interventions are largely reactive, responding to urgent household needs through direct aid. In contrast, the Women Development Society implements structured programs designed to generate sustainable income, including home-based production, agricultural initiatives, and entrepreneurship training. As noted by the Society's director, these programs are intentionally designed to prioritize sustainability, as “we focus on results such as stable income and ongoing projects, not just the number of activities” (P7). Thus, while the Zakat Committee addresses the immediate manifestations of poverty, the Society seeks to address its underlying economic dimensions.

This distinction reflects Empowerment Theory, particularly the notion that sustainable development outcomes depend on enhancing agency, access to resources, and long-term capabilities rather than short-term material support alone.

However, both institutions face similar challenges in identifying and reaching the most vulnerable populations. The Zakat Committee relies heavily on community-based identification, with the director noting that “some families do not openly ask for help, which makes identification difficult” (P1). Similarly, the Women Development Society

highlighted structural limitations, particularly the absence of accurate databases, as reflected in the observation that “there is no updated database, which requires field assessments to identify the most vulnerable groups” (P7). These challenges are further compounded by broader socio-economic and political constraints, including limited funding, restricted mobility, and weak local markets.

From the lens of Structural Violence Theory, these challenges reflect how systemic and institutional constraints—rather than individual limitations—shape access to resources and reduce institutional effectiveness in addressing poverty and unemployment.

5.2 Beneficiaries' experiences

While institutional perspectives provide insight into program design and intent, beneficiaries' experiences offer a deeper understanding of the actual impact of these interventions. Beneficiaries of the Beita Zakat Committee consistently emphasized the importance of direct assistance in ensuring short-term survival. For example, one participant explained that “the financial assistance helps us cover basic expenses” (P2), while another noted that “food packages are essential for our family during difficult times” (P3). These accounts illustrate the critical role of relief-based support in stabilizing vulnerable households.

In terms of Social Protection Theory, these findings confirm the role of safety-net interventions in reducing immediate vulnerability and ensuring household survival under conditions of economic insecurity.

Nevertheless, beneficiaries also highlighted its limitations, as one participant stated that “the support helps us survive, but it does not change our long-term situation” (P4), indicating a lack of sustainable economic transformation.

This limitation further reflects Structural Violence Theory, where persistent structural constraints restrict the transformative capacity of short-term interventions, thereby reproducing dependency conditions.

In contrast, beneficiaries of the Beita Women Development Society reported more sustained and transformative outcomes. Participants described how engagement in training programs and income-generating activities enabled them to improve their economic conditions and reduce dependency on external assistance. One beneficiary noted that “after the training, I started producing food products and now I earn income” (P9), while another explained that “the home garden reduced our expenses and provided additional income” (P10). Beyond financial improvements, participants also emphasized gains in confidence and autonomy, with one stating that “the training helped me learn how to manage and market my project, and I became more independent” (P11).

These findings align strongly with Empowerment Theory, which conceptualizes empowerment as a multidimensional process involving economic participation, enhanced agency, and increased self-efficacy.

Despite these positive outcomes, beneficiaries across both groups reported persistent structural challenges that limit the effectiveness of interventions. Limited job opportunities, restricted access to markets, and financial constraints were frequently mentioned. As one participant observed, “there are very few job opportunities in the area” (P11), while another highlighted that “starting a project requires resources we do not always have” (P8). These constraints indicate that even successful empowerment initiatives operate within a broader context that restricts their scalability and long-term impact.

These constraints further illustrate Structural Violence Theory, showing how macro-level economic and political conditions constrain micro-level empowerment efforts and limit sustainable development outcomes.

5.3 Integrating perspectives

Taken together, the findings reveal a complementary relationship between the two institutional approaches. Relief-based interventions play a crucial role in addressing immediate needs and preventing further economic deterioration, while empowerment-based programs offer pathways toward long-term sustainability and independence. This complementarity is reflected in beneficiaries' own perceptions, as one participant noted that "we need both support and opportunities to work" (P3), while another emphasized that "training alone is not enough without basic support" (P12).

From a Social Protection Theory perspective, this demonstrates the need for an integrated model combining protective and promotive functions within a single system of intervention. Moreover, the interaction between relief and empowerment reflects a dynamic relationship between dependency and agency: relief reduces immediate dependency pressures, while empowerment gradually enhances agency and reduces structural reliance over time. However, Structural Violence Theory cautions that this interaction remains constrained unless broader structural barriers (e.g., labor markets, mobility restrictions, and economic instability) are addressed.

6 Discussion

This study examined the roles of the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society in addressing poverty and unemployment within a structurally constrained Palestinian context. The findings reveal a dual institutional logic in which relief-oriented and empowerment-oriented interventions operate simultaneously but through fundamentally different mechanisms of change. Rather than functioning as separate or competing systems, both approaches are embedded within a broader socio-economic structure characterized by governance limitations, structural constraints, and uneven access to economic opportunities.

The results indicate that the Beita Zakat Committee plays a critical role in immediate poverty alleviation through direct material assistance. This function is particularly important in fragile contexts where formal welfare systems are weak or absent. However, relief mechanisms should not be interpreted as developmental interventions in themselves; rather, they function primarily as systems of vulnerability absorption within structurally violent environments [19]. In the Palestinian context, these structural constraints—restricted mobility, fragmented labor markets, and institutional fragility [14]—limit the capacity of relief to generate long-term transformation. Relief therefore operates within, and is conditioned by, structural violence rather than resolving it.

In contrast, the Beita Women Development Society reflects an empowerment-oriented model focused on skills development, income generation, and entrepreneurship. The findings suggest that empowerment interventions produce more durable outcomes because they shift the focus from immediate consumption to capability formation and agency enhancement. However, this sustainability is not intrinsic to empowerment programs but is mediated by governance quality, institutional coordination, and structural opportunity structures. In this regard, Awwad [6] emphasizes that governance quality

significantly shapes the relationship between entrepreneurship and economic growth in Palestine, indicating that empowerment outcomes are fundamentally governance-dependent. Similarly, Awwad et al. [9] demonstrate that social responsibility embedded in governance frameworks enhances institutional effectiveness, reinforcing the idea that empowerment cannot be separated from institutional design.

A key analytical contribution of this study is the development of a dependency–resilience–agency continuum, which explains how institutional interventions translate into socio-economic outcomes. Relief mechanisms maintain basic survival and prevent extreme vulnerability, thereby sustaining a condition of managed dependency. Within this stabilized condition, empowerment interventions cultivate resilience through skills acquisition, participation in income-generating activities, and entrepreneurial engagement. Over time, resilience may evolve into agency as individuals gain increased control over economic decisions. However, this transition is neither linear nor guaranteed; it is continuously mediated by structural constraints and governance capacity, which determine whether resilience can be converted into sustained autonomy or remains at a survival threshold.

Building on this analytical framework, the study proposes a refined hybrid model of social protection and economic empowerment, which constitutes a central conceptual contribution of the research. In this model, relief and empowerment are not sequential stages but interdependent governance functions operating within a dynamic system. Relief is conceptualized as a stabilizing mechanism that reduces immediate vulnerability and enables initial engagement in empowerment programs. Empowerment, in turn, functions as a capacity-building mechanism that gradually reduces reliance on relief through enhanced income generation and agency formation. The relationship between both components is therefore cyclical and feedback-driven rather than linear: relief enables empowerment, and empowerment progressively reduces the need for relief, creating a reinforcing loop between short-term protection and long-term transformation.

Importantly, the effectiveness of this hybrid model is structurally conditional rather than universally applicable. It is most effective in contexts characterized by protracted instability, weak formal welfare systems, and constrained economic opportunities, such as Palestine. However, its performance depends heavily on governance coordination, institutional integration, and resource availability. In contexts where these conditions are absent, fragmentation between relief and empowerment systems may weaken developmental impact and reinforce dependency cycles.

From a critical perspective, the findings also challenge overly optimistic interpretations of empowerment discourse. While empowerment is often framed as inherently transformative, the evidence suggests that in structurally constrained environments it frequently produces adaptive rather than transformative outcomes. This aligns with Marsal et al. [27], who demonstrate that even when entrepreneurship is supported through mentorship and funding, structural conditions remain decisive in determining outcomes. Similarly, Awwad and Hamdan [8] highlight that women's empowerment is contingent on broader structural and institutional reforms. This indicates that empowerment without structural transformation risks reinforcing localized adaptation rather than systemic change.

At a broader level, the study demonstrates that institutional effectiveness is deeply shaped by structural constraints and governance arrangements. Weak labor markets,

limited mobility, and fragmented institutional ecosystems reduce the scalability of empowerment initiatives while simultaneously increasing reliance on relief-based systems. In this regard, governance emerges as a central mediating variable that determines whether institutional interventions remain fragmented or become synergistically integrated. Awwad et al. [10] further support this interpretation by showing that governance structures significantly influence institutional performance and output quality, a principle that extends to community-based organizations operating in constrained environments.

From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that addressing poverty and unemployment in Palestine requires a shift from isolated interventions to integrated governance-driven development frameworks. First, relief and empowerment programs should be institutionally linked through coordinated referral systems and shared targeting mechanisms to reduce fragmentation. Second, empowerment initiatives require enabling economic environments, including improved access to finance, strengthened local markets, and regulatory support for micro-entrepreneurship. Third, governance capacity within community-based organizations must be strengthened through accountability mechanisms, strategic coordination, and institutional sustainability planning. These recommendations align with sustainability governance perspectives emphasizing integrated institutional systems for development effectiveness [7].

Overall, the study demonstrates that poverty and unemployment in Palestine cannot be addressed through either relief or empowerment alone. Instead, they must be understood as outcomes of a structurally mediated system of dependency, resilience, and constrained agency, in which institutional interventions interact dynamically with governance capacity and structural constraints. While empowerment-oriented approaches appear more sustainable, their effectiveness remains contingent on systemic conditions beyond the control of implementing organizations. Consequently, sustainable socio-economic transformation requires not only programmatic integration but also deeper engagement with governance reform and structural constraint reduction.

7 Conclusion

This study examined the roles of the Beita Zakat Committee and the Beita Women Development Society in addressing poverty and unemployment within the local context of Beita, Palestine. The findings demonstrate that while the Zakat Committee plays a vital role in providing immediate relief through financial and material assistance, the Women Development Society contributes to long-term poverty reduction through empowerment-based interventions, including training, income-generating activities, and support for women's entrepreneurship.

The study highlights that relief-based approaches are essential for stabilizing vulnerable households and preventing further socio-economic deterioration. However, they remain limited in their capacity to produce sustainable change. In contrast, empowerment-based interventions foster economic independence, enhance agency, and contribute to improved living conditions, particularly for women. Nevertheless, both approaches operate within a broader context of structural constraints, including limited employment opportunities, restricted market access, and economic instability.

A key contribution of this study is the identification of a complementary relationship between relief and empowerment strategies, conceptualized through a hybrid model

of community-based social protection discussed in the previous section. This integrated understanding underscores the importance of combining short-term assistance with long-term capacity building in addressing poverty and unemployment in conflict-affected and resource-constrained settings.

Building on these findings, the study proposes a hybrid model of community-based social protection that integrates relief-oriented and empowerment-oriented interventions within a unified conceptual framework. Unlike conventional social protection approaches that often treat relief and empowerment as separate, sequential, or parallel but disconnected interventions, the proposed model emphasizes their functional interdependence and dynamic interaction.

The study has practical implications for policymakers, civil society organizations, and development practitioners, emphasizing the need for coordinated strategies that combine humanitarian support with capacity-building initiatives. Future research may expand this analysis by incorporating larger samples, longitudinal designs, or comparative studies across different Palestinian communities.

8 Limitations and research implications

This study provides valuable insights into community-based approaches to poverty and unemployment in Beita; however, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is based on a relatively small sample ($n = 12$), which, while appropriate for qualitative inquiry, may limit the generalizability of the findings beyond the specific local context. Second, the research focuses on two institutions within a single geographic area, which may not fully capture the diversity of community-based interventions across different regions in Palestine. Third, the reliance on self-reported data from both directors and beneficiaries may introduce potential biases, including social desirability and selective recall. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to assess long-term outcomes of empowerment interventions, particularly in relation to sustained employment and income stability.

Despite these limitations, the study offers important implications for future research. Further studies could adopt larger and more diverse samples across multiple Palestinian communities to enhance generalizability and comparative analysis. Longitudinal research is particularly needed to examine the long-term impact of empowerment-based interventions on poverty reduction and employment trajectories. Moreover, future research could explore the role of digital technologies, market access, and policy frameworks in strengthening community-based initiatives. Expanding the analysis to include quantitative measures or mixed-methods designs would also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of hybrid models of social protection. Finally, comparative studies across different conflict-affected contexts may help to refine and validate the proposed hybrid model.

Generative artificial intelligence (AI)

This study utilized large language models (LLMs) to assist with translation, language editing, and referencing, ensuring clarity, coherence, and proper citation formatting for an Arabic-speaking sample.

Confidentiality measures

Participants' privacy was protected through anonymization, secure data storage, and restricted access to research materials, ensuring confidentiality throughout the study.

Author contributions

OJ: Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, writing—review and editing, supervision, and project administration. SJ: Conceptualization, validation, resources,

writing—review and editing, and supervision. Both authors have read and approved the final version of the manuscript and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval was not required for this study, as the research did not involve medical procedures or risk to participants. However, ethical considerations were followed, and permission to conduct the study was obtained from the relevant institutional authority. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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