



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Non-Governmental Organisations and Legitimacy: Authority, Power and Resources

Gnes, D.; Vermeulen, F.

**DOI**

[10.1163/23519924-00502002](https://doi.org/10.1163/23519924-00502002)

**Publication date**

2019

**Document Version**

Final published version

**Published in**

Journal of Migration History

**License**

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act (<https://www.openaccess.nl/en/in-the-netherlands/you-share-we-take-care>)

[Link to publication](#)

**Citation for published version (APA):**

Gnes, D., & Vermeulen, F. (2019). Non-Governmental Organisations and Legitimacy: Authority, Power and Resources. *Journal of Migration History*, 5(2), 218-247. <https://doi.org/10.1163/23519924-00502002>

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

*UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (<https://dare.uva.nl>)*



BRILL

JOURNAL OF MIGRATION HISTORY 5 (2019) 218-247

JOURNAL of  
MIGRATION  
HISTORY  
brill.com/jmh

# Non-Governmental Organisations and Legitimacy: Authority, Power and Resources

*Davide Gnes*

University of Amsterdam

*D.Gnes@uva.nl*

*Floris Vermeulen*

University of Amsterdam

*ff.vermeulen@uva.nl*

## Abstract

In the analysis of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), legitimacy and legitimation are useful concepts because they bring to light the processes through which organisational entities justify their right to exist and their actions within a particular normative context. Theories of legitimacy underscore the moral basis of organisational power as grounded in the relationship between organisations and different kinds of audiences. In this article, we look at how those concepts and theories relate to the study of NGOs. Those theories not only help us understand how organisations establish themselves, strengthen their position and survive over time despite very limited material resources of their own, but also how organisations may build political power. In our review of the literature on organisational legitimacy, we focus on three main aspects of legitimacy: the conceptualisation of the term in organisational sociology, political sociology and political science; the constraining role of institutionalised normative contexts and competing audiences in the legitimation processes; the agentic role of organisations within both institutional and strategic contexts.

## Keywords

organisational legitimacy – NGOs – migration – mediated resource

## 1 Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) formulate specific claims on the basis of normative assumptions. They often appeal to norms of democratic participation and representation, they conform to bureaucratic standards of effectiveness or procedures of accountability, they mobilise doctrines of human rights. Much – though not all – of this has to do with legitimation and legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> Legitimation is the process of how social entities justify to others their right to exist and to act. Organisations must constantly offer ‘an acceptable theory of themselves’ that rationalises their existence though still also sanctions the power relations to which they subscribe.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the ‘truthfulness’ of their claims, organisations articulate them to mobilise public support, targeting prospective activists, donors or volunteers, or to put pressure on private and public actors to change their practices. For NGOs, legitimacy may therefore translate into actual power by providing access to resources (mobilisation of time commitment, labour or money), or rather by providing moral authority and credibility that allows them to have political influence over more resourceful private and public actors, such as private corporations or the state.<sup>3</sup> In order to be legitimate, organisations therefore regularly try to make their goals desirable, their procedures appropriate, or their structure comprehensible to themselves and to others as a function of the specific socio-cultural context in which they operate.

It is common to say that NGOs derive their legitimacy from their conformity to a set of established criteria. Depending on how we conceptualise NGOs and their relation to institutions, these may include notions such as ‘moral’ and ‘procedural’ accountability, democratic representation, economic effectiveness or

---

1 We are grateful to Ruud Koopmans, Eric Schliesser, Enzo Rossi and Benno Nietelenbos for providing extremely valuable feedback and suggestions on how to strengthen the article. The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007–2013) under grant agreement n° 316796.

John Maurer, *Readings in organizational theory: open system approaches* (New York 1978); John Meyer and Richard Scott, ‘Centralization and the legitimacy problems of local government’, in: John Meyer and Richard Scott (eds), *Organizational environments: ritual and rationality* (Beverly Hills 1983) 199–215; David Beetham, *The legitimation of power* (New York 2013); Davide Gnes and Floris Vermeulen, ‘Legitimacy as the basis for organizational development of voluntary organizations’, in: Ram Cnaan and Carl Milofsky (eds), *Handbook of community movements and local organizations in the 21st century* (Cham 2018) 189–209.

2 Meyer and Scott, ‘Centralization and the legitimacy problems’.

3 Mark Suchman, ‘Managing legitimacy: strategic and institutional approaches’, *Academy of Management Review* 20:3 (1995) 571–610; Beetham, *The legitimation of power*.

social empowerment.<sup>4</sup> However, many of these studies tend to adopt a normative perspective to the study of legitimacy,<sup>5</sup> ‘measuring’ the legitimacy of NGOs against a set of *a priori* criteria formulated by the researcher.<sup>6</sup> We here argue that studies that look at the role and effectiveness of NGOs in the field of migration have much to gain from adopting a descriptive and empirical approach to legitimacy. As argued in the introduction of this special issue, the influence of NGOs can only be explained if the activities of NGOs are studied in relation to the larger organisational setting in which these NGOs function. Moreover, their changing role can only be appreciated when examined from a historical perspective. While Schrover, Vosters and Glynn emphasise the history of relations between NGOs and inter-governmental organisations (IGOs) and nation state governments,<sup>7</sup> we build on a similar analytical framework to probe NGOs’ relations at a different level of analysis. While maintaining a focus on state institutions, we also consider NGOs’ changing relations with municipal and neighbourhood actors (including other civil society organisations and local migrant communities).

By taking a historicised, context- and actor-sensitive perspective, we can understand how and for whom different legitimating claims actually matter, how legitimacy can play a role as an organisational resource and moral power through authority, and how those dynamics may significantly change over time. By studying legitimation processes in this way, we can better grasp the different ways in which NGOs may or may not be able to gain influence in the field in which they operate, for example by mobilising support of public opinion, activists or volunteers for their cause, or by exerting direct moral pressure on policy-makers or private actors to change their course of action. We further ask the following questions: which actors are relevant for the legitimation process? Is legitimation merely a process of organisational conformity to the environment or rather a process that preserves organisational agency and

---

4 Iain Atack ‘Four criteria of development NGO legitimacy’, *World Development* 27:5 (1999) 855–864.

5 Unlike moral and political philosophers, concerned with their own prescriptions of how power relations *ought* to be arranged and according to which justifications, social scientists are mainly interested in legitimacy as an empirical and socially constructed process, grounded in specific temporal and geographical contexts as well as embedded in social relations and their associated sets of meanings: Beetham, *The legitimation of power*.

6 Benno Nietelenbos, *Political legitimacy beyond Weber: analytical framework* (London 2016); Vivien Collingwood, ‘Non-governmental organisations, power and legitimacy in international society’, *Review of International Studies* 32 (2006) 439–454.

7 Marlou Schrover, Teuntje Vosters and Irial Glynn, ‘NGOs and European migration governance (1860s until present)’, in this issue.

autonomy? Whereas the introduction of this special issue takes Weber's ideas on authority as a starting point for understanding the historical development of NGOs working in the field of immigration, we focus on how another of Weber's famous concepts, legitimacy, plays a role in gaining and exercising this authority.

In the following sections, we attempt to provide some answers to these complicated questions by explicitly adopting a descriptive approach to the study of legitimacy. We base this article on a description of concrete examples from a number of studies, including our own, and a review of the existing literature, namely in the field of political sociology, organisational sociology, political science, international relations and international development. We conceptualise non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in very broad terms as voluntary organisations, that is, as relatively formally organised groups 'that receive substantial contributions of time (volunteering), below-cost goods or services, or money'.<sup>8</sup> We see NGOs as part of a so-called third sector, a domain of organised human action that extends past family, but remains distinct from the logics of the state and the market, and in which *most*<sup>9</sup> participants (both individuals and organisations) are not remunerated for their participation.<sup>10</sup>

We believe that this definition is broad enough to include a wide variety of non-governmental organisational forms in different national and international contexts, including advocacy organisations, international development organisations,<sup>11</sup> migrant associations, recreational and neighbourhood clubs, social movement organisations and informal activist groups, and more.

---

8 Richard Steinberg and Walter Powell, 'Introduction', in: Walter Powell and Richard Steinberg (eds), *The Non-profit sector: a research handbook* (2nd ed.) (New Haven 2006) 1–13, 3.

9 Many organisations may of course include a significant number of paid staff members. Nevertheless, even highly professionalised organisations still largely depend on the unremunerated contribution of volunteers and activists, or on the disinterested (in the sense of being devoid of a market exchange logic) financial contribution of donors and subscribers.

10 Jocelyn Viterna, Emily Clough and Killian Clarke, 'Reclaiming the "third sector" from "civil society": A new agenda for development studies', *Sociology of Development* 1:1 (2015) 173–207.

11 The case of international NGOs operating in different countries is more complex than national organisations. Nevertheless, we maintain that the distinction between NGOs and the spheres of the market and the state remains relevant, with the latter also possibly including supranational institutions (European Union, United Nations, specific global fora such as the UN Climate Change Conference, etc.). Whether in this case the state remains an empirical actor for the legitimacy of international NGOs should of course be treated as an empirical question.

We also find the definition suitably inclusive of organisations pursuing various goals or a combination thereof, from explicit social and political change to more traditional service provisions or economic development.<sup>12</sup>

We focus on three main aspects of legitimacy: conceptualisation of the term; definition of the legitimisation process in relation to the surrounding context and specific audiences; and organisational agency within this context, through both an institutional and a strategic perspective. We underscore three pillars of the theory: the existence of institutionalised expectations that are intrinsically heterogeneous, which problematises the assumption of broad societal consensus; the existence of different and competing audiences, who may be as interested in social reproduction as in social disruption; the possibility that organisations can purposefully manipulate the environment to legitimate new forms and claims.

## 2 Defining Legitimacy

In its broad usage, legitimacy entails the study of the normative dimension of power relations in society.<sup>13</sup> Since at least Weber, social scientists have pointed out legitimacy's role in justifying a particular institutional hierarchy or power arrangement.<sup>14</sup> Weber famously elaborated a typology of legitimate authority, distinguishing between power holders who exclusively used coercion (or the threat thereof) and incentives in order to rule (*de facto* authority), and those who were able to rule through legitimacy, that is by successfully claiming the right to rule (*legitimate* authority).<sup>15</sup> Weber further argued that both the existence of a system of power as a 'social fact' *and* the belief in power holders' legitimacy by subordinates was crucial to understanding why the latter would accept being under a position of domination, especially when it explicitly countered their self-interest.<sup>16</sup> Besides more general institutionalised

12 Given the heterogeneity of forms, purposes and structures of NGOs, and in order to avoid excessive reification of organisational characteristics *a priori*, we refrained from proposing a more precise definition – such as, for example, organisational compliance with national legal frameworks or the pursuit of a public good mission (see Erla Thrandardottir, 'NGO legitimacy: Four models', *Representation* 51:1 (2015) 107–123).

13 Beetham, *The legitimization of power*; Arthur Stinchcombe, *Constructing social theories* (Chicago 1968).

14 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge* (New York 1967); Beetham, *The legitimization of power*.

15 Max Weber, *Economy and society* (Berkeley 1978).

16 Netelenbos, *Political legitimacy beyond Weber*.

social expectations guiding behaviour, Weber also showed how specific sources of legitimacy, such as charisma, tradition or legal rationality, could have a great impact in shaping the subjective orientations of individuals, namely their obedience, towards particular rules and leaders. For political theorists, legitimacy is therefore a key feature of any system of power because it ‘concerns those ideas and practices that give those in power their moral authority and credibility’.<sup>17</sup> Within this view, Beetham argued that, in the first instance, legitimacy entails conformity to and respect of different sets of rules and procedures. Those rules regulate how individuals and organisations attain positions of authority (or legitimate power) by virtue of their role, and how this power should be exercised, that is which ends and purposes should be considered acceptable. However, for actual legitimacy to exist and therefore to correspond to some degree of authority, those rules need to be normatively justified, meaning they need to correspond to actual institutionalised beliefs in given settings and be shared by actors.

In their treatment of legitimacy, political scientists have focused on the analysis of large institutions, such as the state. For this reason, they have been mainly concerned with legitimacy as explaining sustained domination, societal stability and obedience to power holders. Organisational sociologists, however, in theorising legitimacy had to grapple with the fact that most types of organisations are essentially mid-range institutions endowed with relatively limited resources and means of power, mediating ‘the relationship between system-level institutions – such as the state and the economy – and urban communities and neighbourhoods’.<sup>18</sup> Within this context, legitimacy therefore lends itself to a more dynamic conceptualisation, as its analysis rather centres on how organisations establish their right to operate, their ability to attract varied sources of support and to project political influence. Instead of obedience and compliance, typical of broader societal authorities, organisational legitimacy theory thus emphasises ‘softer’ processes such as collaboration, support or recognition depending on the relative position of the organisation within established power arrangements.<sup>19</sup>

17 Beetham, *The legitimation of power*, x.

18 Michael McQuarrie and Nicole Marwell, ‘The missing organizational dimension in urban sociology’, *City & Community* 8:3 (2009) 247–268, 256.

19 This does not mean, of course, that legitimacy as domination or the right to rule is completely absent from the organisational dynamics under review in this article. For example, this aspect remains key if we decide to focus primarily on the internal life of organisations, namely on the configuration of power relations among board members or within the staff (particularly between paid and professionalised staff on the one side, and volunteers on the other). Within such a context, legitimacy as stability and obedience may remain very relevant.

We can broadly single out two conceptualisations in the study of NGO legitimacy: one rooted in political science and international relations, and one developed in organisational and neo-institutional sociology.<sup>20</sup> The first conceptualisation is especially concerned with the role and influence of NGOs in international fora, and with analysing how NGOs morally justify their political and social action. Those researchers are particularly interested in assessing the legitimacy of organisational behaviour, that is, to evaluate the 'rightness' of an action 'according to [a] particular set of rules of standards'.<sup>21</sup> As Thrandardottir argued, 'the ultimate aim of applying legitimacy to NGOs is to look for answers on whether, and how, they can be included as legitimate actors in global politics'.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on an analysis of NGOs within an international context, scholars in this tradition also claim that, in a context of power inequalities, NGO legitimacy is a type of *power* mobilised to counter the 'raw power' of other institutions and to exert political influence, namely by appealing to their role as a moral actor guided by altruistic and idealistic motives.<sup>23</sup> This conceptualisation of NGO legitimacy, and particularly its emphasis on legitimacy as a potential form of 'civil society counter-power', certainly resonates with commonsensical understandings of how NGOs are perceived in the public sphere, particularly in the Global North. However, in conceptualising NGOs as very specific political actors, this view often tends to make strong *a priori* normative arguments. Typically, it assumes that NGO legitimacy is inherently dependent on a given set of criteria, such as organisational lawfulness in a particular legal context, its credibility, the quality of its internal democracy, its responsiveness to the concerns and needs of particular actors, or its capacity to promote the empowerment of the people it caters for with its services.<sup>24</sup>

20 For a somewhat different conceptualization of the literature on NGO legitimacy see Thrandardottir, 'NGO Legitimacy: Four Models'.

21 Collingwood 'Non-governmental organisations', 444.

22 Thrandardottir, 'NGO legitimacy: four models', 109.

23 See: Jens Steffek and Kristina Hahn (eds), *Evaluating transnational NGOs legitimacy, accountability, representation* (New York 2010); Beetham, *The legitimation of power* (Ch. 9); Oliver Walton, 'Understanding contemporary challenges to INGO legitimacy: integrating top-down and bottom-up perspectives', *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 27:6 (2016) 2764–2786.

24 Atack, 'Four criteria of development NGO legitimacy'; Sarah Lister, 'NGO legitimacy technical issue or social construct?', *Critique of Anthropology* 23:2 (2003) 175–192. For a more nuanced view, see also Walton et al., 'Understanding contemporary challenges to INGO legitimacy'.



In particular, notions of *representation* and *accountability* are understood to be the two key pillars underpinning NGO legitimacy.<sup>25</sup>

The second conceptualisation of organisational legitimacy is rooted in the long-standing institutional and neo-institutional traditions of organisational sociology.<sup>26</sup> Not directly linked to the NGO and non-profit literature, rather to the domains of sociological functionalism, business management and administration, this approach emerged out of two very different theoretical concerns. First, to understand how different organisations operating in the same context often came to resemble each other as a result of their interaction with the surrounding environment; second, to grasp what factors were responsible for organisational maintenance and survival over long periods of time. Unlike most researchers in the political science and international relations traditions, organisational sociologists have proposed a view of legitimacy and legitimation as inherently socially constructed processes, as the degree of conformity or congruence of organisational goals, structures and activities to laws, norms, and values embedded in a specific context. In other words, based on broad criteria such as appropriateness, desirability and propriety of organisations and their actions within 'some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions';<sup>27</sup> organisational researchers have conceptualised organisational legitimacy as 'the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provides explanations for [...an organisation's] existence, functioning, and jurisdiction, and [for the potential] lack [...of] alternatives'.<sup>28</sup> Researchers within this tradition have highlighted how organisations, by managing external pressures to conform to context-dependent normative requirements, are able to attract funding, members or volunteers that ensure organisational continuity. Within this theoretical stream, organisational legitimacy is not conceptually linked to power, nor is it seen as a means to gain political influence; rather, at

---

25 Steffek and Hahn, *Evaluating transnational NGOs legitimacy*; see also Ringo Ossewaarde, André Nijhof and Liesbet Heyse, 'Dynamics of NGO legitimacy: how organising betrays core missions of INGOs', *Public Administration and Development: The International Journal of Management Research and Practice* 281 (2008) 42–53.

26 Parsons was one of the first to introduce the concept of organisational legitimacy in this sense, conceptualising it as a force shaping organisations in accordance with the expectations and specific needs of a society. In so doing Parsons largely neglected the role of individual subjective orientations, while emphasising another Weberian assumption, that is, that social entities could legitimate their claims by respecting established norms and procedures, both formal and informal: Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy'.

27 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy', 574

28 Meyer and Scott 'Centralization and the legitimacy problems of local government', 201.

best,<sup>29</sup> it is seen as a mediated resource, providing organisations with access to other resources (such as money and labour) that contribute to the well-being of the organisation.<sup>30</sup> This is possible because, as social movements and NGO scholars have regularly underscored, participation in and support of NGOs has a strong normative component.<sup>31</sup> Individuals are attracted to an organisation not only by 'selective incentives' – better wages, services, training, prestige, gratitude, etc. – but also by appeals for solidarity, fairness or social justice.<sup>32</sup>

In this article we seek to integrate the strengths of those two different approaches into a common analytical framework to understand NGO legitimisation dynamics more broadly.<sup>33</sup> We can single out a number of properties that, in our understanding, characterise such conceptualisation. First, legitimacy is seen as an inherent *relational* process; it is produced in interaction between an organisation and different audiences (i.e. the legitimisation process). Second, organisational legitimisation processes are to an extent grounded in established normative expectations that transcend the judgment of single individuals, both inside and outside organisations. Third, organisations may well reflect the expectations of the surrounding environment in their structures and operations, but they also bear their own strategic capacity to adapt, reformulate, and potentially challenge those external expectations. Fourth, and linked to the previous point, legitimacy is thus seen as both a strategic *mediated resource* and a *form of power* (authority) for organisations, since it will likely provide access to other resources but also possibly translate into political influence.

---

29 Within a strict neo-institutional view of legitimacy, legitimisation may be seen as the mere practice through which organisations conform to and duly comply with existing context-dependent normative expectations for the purpose of survival. See, for example, Paul DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell, 'The iron cage revisited: Collective rationality and institutional isomorphism in organizational fields', *American Sociological Review* 48:2 (1983) 147–160. However, others scholars have called for a re-assessment of organisations as strategic agents, contending that organisations are also able to challenge and reshape such normative expectations. Blake Ashforth and Barrie Gibbs, 'The double-edge of organizational legitimisation', *Organization Science* 1:2 (1990) 177–194.

30 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy'.

31 John McCarthy and Mayer Zald, 'Resource mobilization and social movements: a partial theory', *American Journal of Sociology* 82:6 (1977) 1212–1241.

32 Mancur Olson, *The logic of collective action: public goods and the theory of groups* (Cambridge 1965); David Knoke, 'Associations and interest groups', *Annual Review of Sociology* 12 (1986) 1–21.

33 For an alternative attempt to synthesise different literatures on legitimacy see Walton et al., 'Understanding contemporary challenges to INGO legitimacy'.

### 3 The Social Construction of Legitimacy: Normative Criteria and Audiences

In this special issue's introduction, the editors identify three possible forms of NGO authority, distinguishing between expert authority, moral authority, and logistical authority. How can we understand these types of authority in relation to the empirical contexts in which NGOs operate? How do NGO authority claims change over time? In this section we take a closer look at the production of normative expectations as a result of context-dependent processes of institutionalisation. We ask where the rules and procedures that NGOs incorporate come from, and we describe how organisations come to adopt certain organisational forms, pursue particular goals and activities and formulate some claims, but not others. In pointing out this contingency of normative criteria, we also suggest what grounds are typically relevant for NGOs in contemporary Western societies, and in relation to whom.

In a general sense, we can think of NGOs as emerging in contexts where a 'stock' of values, meanings and norms already exist, and where this knowledge is largely taken for granted by a collectivity of individuals.<sup>34</sup> This institutionalised knowledge is important, because it provides 'cultural definitions [that] determine how [an] organisation is built, how it is run, and, simultaneously, how it is understood and evaluated' by different audiences.<sup>35</sup> These cultural definitions generate requirements and social expectations that individuals, sometimes unconsciously, incorporate into their organisations, and which may ultimately legitimate the organisation within a specific context.<sup>36</sup> Certain requirements may generally apply to a vast array of organisations, such as having an organisational mission, hiring and paying employees, satisfying tax agency, health, and labour regulations. Others may instead apply to specific organisational domains – consider, for example, the membership structure and democratic decision-making of labour unions or the money-making logic embedded in for-profit organisations.

Defining the appropriate normative context of organisational analysis is no easy task. Its complexity lies in the accountability organisations often have to multiple stakeholders; legitimacy, moreover, must be evaluated in relation to the normative expectations of each audience, who may not always be

---

34 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The social construction of reality* (New York 1967).

35 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy', 576.

36 Joseph Galaskiewicz, 'Interorganizational relations', *Annual Review of Sociology* 11:1 (1985) 281–304.

compatible with each other or internally consistent.<sup>37</sup> As Scott stated, ‘whose values define legitimacy is [ultimately] a matter of concerted power’.<sup>38</sup> According to Scott, an organisation is less likely to be seen as an overall legitimate actor when it is confronted by competing sovereign authorities, which embed conflicting normative requirements. Pfeffer and Salancik suggested that an organisation need not be legitimate for all segments of society, but rather at least for those third parties that contribute to the organisational resources critical to its survival.<sup>39</sup>

Organisational sociologists have traditionally argued that particular actors, such as state institutions or large organisations, carry greater weight than others in the legitimation process for any type of organisation. As DiMaggio and Powell argued in their influential theory of the ‘institutional cage’, organisations may come to resemble each other not so much out of concern for efficiency, but rather because they develop a shared understanding of how things ‘should be done’ within a particular organisational *field*. Organisations, particularly in the private sector, are therefore evaluated through peer recognition, and on their ability to meet mutually accepted professional standards.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, organisations are pressured to incorporate particular organisational features by the bureaucratic state, which plays a key role in homogenising standards and procedures in all domains of social life. NGOs, in order to be recognised by state institutions, and possibly become eligible for government (and often private) funding, have to abide by national laws and regulations which define the scope of their mission, specify their organisational structure and delimit the range of permitted activities. Thrandardottir, in her study of Amnesty International UK, Greenpeace UK and CAFOD in the United Kingdom, has shown how the national regulatory framework on charities is mainly geared towards service-providing organisations, and therefore forces organisations that are politically active to either register under company law – and adapt their structures accordingly – or rather limit such kind of activities.<sup>41</sup>

37 Kimberly Elsbach and Robert Sutton, ‘Acquiring organizational legitimacy through illegitimate actions: A marriage of institutional and impression management theories’, *Academy of Management Journal* 35:4 (1992) 699–738.

38 Richard Scott, *Institutions and organizations: ideas, interests, and identities* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.) (Los Angeles 2014) 73.

39 Jeffrey Pfeffer and Gerald Salancik, *The external control of organizations: A resource dependence perspective* (Stanford 1978).

40 DiMaggio and Powell, ‘The iron cage revisited’.

41 Erla Thrandardottir, *What makes NGOs legitimate? An analysis of Amnesty International UK’s, Greenpeace UK’s and Cafod’s legitimacy claims in the UK national context*. Diss. The University of Manchester (Manchester 2012).

Unlike for-profit organisations – whose existence is justified by their broad acceptability within capitalist societies through the logic of profit-maximisation – NGOs often rely on a combination of normative expectations that go beyond simply adopting formal denominations and procedures and conforming to the wishes of the state as an audience. From an *empirical* point of view, contemporary voluntary organisations in Western societies show the tendency to base their legitimisation strategies on a mix of democratic and technocratic ideals. If the first level relates to their claim to representation and participation, the second level relates to the organisational staff's claim to knowledge and experience concerning a specific domain of action. Claims of representation and participation are generally linked to the notion of *civil society* (or the third sector), which has over time become accepted as a key condition for a healthy democracy.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, when organisations claim to cater to or represent disadvantaged and stigmatised groups, such as undocumented immigrants, the homeless or drug addicts, they also carry 'moral weight'. This is mainly because 'the representation of ignored viewpoints appeals to a democratic conception of a pluralist public arena in a context where there is a strong bias towards the voices and interests of the powerful'.<sup>43</sup> Of course, what kinds of claims are seen as valid – and by whom, for example by the state – differs across contexts and within NGOs. For example, in the early 1980s the Amsterdam government introduced a multicultural policy that was designed to integrate the growing immigrant population in the city. It officially classified main immigrant groups as 'minority target groups' based on their national origin and began to provide subsidies to fund their organisational activities as a way to improve their socio-economic positions. The largest immigrant groups in the city – Moroccans, Turks and Surinamese – reacted to this policy change by establishing a large number of new immigrant organisations in which the ethnic origin of the group was emphasised.<sup>44</sup> Smith and Lipsky, in their study of the history of non-profit service organisations in the US during the twentieth century, have argued that American voluntary organisations have traditionally legitimated themselves to public opinion by

---

42 Els de Graauw, *Making immigrant rights real: Nonprofits and the politics of integration in San Francisco* (Ithaca 2016).

43 Beetham, *The legitimation of power*, 277.

44 Floris Vermeulen, *The immigrant organising process. Turkish organisations in Amsterdam and Berlin and surinamese organisations in Amsterdam 1960–2000. IMISCOE Dissertations* (Amsterdam 2006); Floris Vermeulen and Maria Berger, 'Civic networks and political behavior: Turks in Amsterdam and Berlin', in: Karthick Ramakrishnan and Irene Bloemraad (eds), *Civic hopes and political realities: immigrants, community organizations and political engagement* (New York 2008) 160–192.

claiming to be the 'guardians of community', that is the representatives of a 'self-conscious collectivity of shared sentiments that take on voluntary activities consistent with those sentiments'.<sup>45</sup> Community, in this sense, is therefore seen in contrast to other spheres of social life such as the state and the market but not necessarily linked to democratic politics, and becomes a valued entity in itself that needs to be preserved.

As should be clear from those examples, organisational claims are therefore based on and respond to context- and audience-dependent normative assumptions, so this interaction can hardly produce generalisable, objective indicators of legitimacy. As others have already underscored, the issue of varied audiences with diverging normative expectations is critical to understand organisational legitimacy.<sup>46</sup> Smith and Lipsky noted that certain traditional immigrant organisations in the US legitimated themselves to their immediate audiences by appealing to specific values and norms grounded in religion.<sup>47</sup> The authors give the example of long-standing religious agencies funded by immigrant communities, such as the Catholic Charities, the Salvation Army or Lutheran agencies. Particularly up until the 1960s and 1970s, when the US government took a more active role in supporting non-profits and therefore began to change their organisational priorities and goals, those organisations mostly acted as an extension of a particular church's religious mission. More in general, religious NGOs are a typical example of this diversity in legitimating strategies, as well as of the possible conflicts that may arise from the presence of conflicting audiences. These organisations may derive much of their legitimacy and persuasiveness from the degree to which their views are considered to be representative of the membership, but projecting such perception may be quite challenging if the constituency includes both conservative and more liberal believers.<sup>48</sup> Vermeulen, Minkoff and Van der Meer illustrate for Amsterdam that religious immigrant organisations have significantly higher survival rates than non-religious immigrant organisations. They explain this result by the fact that the immigrant constituency in general considers these former types of organisations as more appropriate and desirable than the latter.<sup>49</sup> At

45 Steven Smith and Michael Lipsky, *Nonprofits for hire: The welfare state in the age of contracting* (Cambridge 2009) 74.

46 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy'; see also Erla Thrandardottir, 'NGO audiences, a Beethamite analysis. Report No CUTP 013' (London 2017).

47 Smith and Lipsky, *Nonprofits for hire*.

48 Julia Berger, 'Religious nongovernmental organizations: an exploratory analysis', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 14:1 (2003) 15–39.

49 Floris Vermeulen, Debra Minkoff and Tom van der Meer, 'The local embedding of community-based organizations', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 45:1 (2016) 23–44.

the same time, staff members of this kind of NGO need to have the theological knowledge to serve their diverse constituency adequately, and to be seen as credible within that environment. Nicholls and Vermeulen provide an example of conflicts over the construction of a conservative Turkish mosque in Amsterdam in the 1990s. The board of the mosque emphasised more progressive and liberal viewpoints in order to appease local authorities and obtain certain permits and support. However, sensing that the Amsterdam-based staff had gone too far and risked undermining the legitimacy of the religious movement towards its (more conservative) membership, its Germany-based leaders interfered and removed the board members from their position. Without the support of Amsterdam authorities, the religious movement still managed to eventually build the mosque but it took years longer than expected.<sup>50</sup>

We can see those tensions at work also when we observe NGO's claim to expertise, and how such a claim is assessed by different audiences. Already in the 1990s, researchers suggested that both state and market logics had gained considerable influence over a number of domains of social life.<sup>51</sup> For non-governmental organisations – especially those that have become government-contracted service providers – this has meant conforming more and more to managerial and efficiency standards, as well as to externally defined criteria of substantive output. As Alexander stated, 'NGOs are often located in the intersection of competing institutional spheres, as non-profits, traditionally steeped in the rhetoric of charity, religion, or democracy, are increasingly governed by the rhetoric of business.'<sup>52</sup> As Gatrell argues in the concluding article of this special issue, NGOs can and should often be considered as business enterprises of a particular kind. The more NGOs come to rely on a different pool of supporters, the more NGOs are expected to successfully deal with very conflicting expectations regarding their action, just as is the case with businesses. As Smith and Lipsky argued, NGOs with service provision tasks are more and more expected to embrace universality in their distribution of services, but also show responsiveness to accommodate complexity, be accountable in the

---

50 Walter Nicholls and Floris Vermeulen, 'Rights through the city: the urban basis of immigrant rights struggles in Amsterdam and Paris', in: Michael Smith and Michael McQuarrie (eds), *Remaking urban citizenship: organizations, institutions, and the right to the city* (New Brunswick 2012) 79–94.

51 Roger Friedland and Robert Alford, 'Bringing society back in symbols, practices and institutional contradictions', in: Walter Powell and Paul DiMaggio (eds), *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (Chicago 1991) 232–266.

52 Victoria Alexander, 'Environmental constraints and organizational strategies: complexity, conflict, and coping in the nonprofit sector', in: Walter Powell and Elisabeth Clemens (eds), *Private action and the public good* (New Haven 1998) 272–290, 273.

sense of being responsible to the public interest, be efficient in the sense of striking the right balance between costs and output, and maintain fiscal integrity.<sup>53</sup> Gatrell goes as far as to provocatively say that, if NGOs wish to stay in business and still be considered a legitimate organisational form, they may be expected to generate a surplus, even if this means an adjustment to their profile.

Overall, certain normative expectations may be directly relevant when organisations explicitly seek legitimation from the state, while others may be more broadly institutionalised in a given context. In fact, normative constraints remain – even for NGOs that reject market principles, refuse to seek state support or explicitly antagonise state institutions.<sup>54</sup> Social movement scholars have directed their attention to how environmental constraints affect voluntary organisations that actively promote radical social change. Analysing the disbanding of national women's and minority membership organisations between 1955 and 1985, Minkoff found that those organisations' life chances were strongly dependent on the acceptance or rejection of their political 'blueprints for action' by external audiences, especially supporters and volunteers. The more organisations were perceived to 'follow an accepted course of institutional challenge based on moderate objectives and targeted at nonpolitical arenas', the more their legitimacy increased in the eyes of their constituencies and the overall public opinion, whose support was crucial to push for broader political change.<sup>55</sup> Taking this perspective, other researchers have hinted at the strong role that the state still retains in shaping not only the forms of organisations, but also the appropriateness of organisational goals and discursive claims.<sup>56</sup> For example, in his study of the discursive strategies pursued by immigrant rights organisations in France and Los Angeles, Nicholls noted that, in both cases, immigrant advocacy groups grappled with the challenge of claiming equal rights for 'outsiders' in contexts still shaped by the ideology

---

53 Smith and Lipsky, *Nonprofits for hire*.

54 For example, many social movement organisations do not wish to be associated in any way with government institutions and refuse to apply for or receive any government funding for their activities. State legitimation may in fact have a delegitimising effect on the organisation for some of its other audiences, such as activists and militants.

55 Debra Minkoff, 'The organization of survival: women's and racial-ethnic volunteer and activist organizations, 1955–1985', *Social Forces* 71:4 (1993) 887–908, 903–904.

56 Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, 'How national citizenship shapes transnationalism: A comparative analysis of migrant and minority claims-making in Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands', in: Christian Joppke and Ewa Morawska (eds), *Toward assimilation and citizenship: immigrants in liberal nation-states* (New York 2003) 195–238.



of the nation and national citizenship.<sup>57</sup> In order to gain political recognition, organisations thus had no choice but to ‘stress [...] [immigrants’] direct tie to the country, discuss [...] immigrants’ goals and aspirations [in a way] that resonated with national values, and frame [...] [immigrants] as contributors to the national community.’<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, we must constantly remain alert to the heterogeneity in values and normative expectations, paying attention to how different audiences, such as private funders or communities, may evaluate the legitimacy of NGOs in completely different ways. This dimension is especially important for NGOs, whose interaction with members, militants, volunteers, or constituents remains one of the major axes of organisational activity. Communities themselves, moreover, are stratified along a number of cleavages, including class and gender.<sup>59</sup> As a result, the endorsement of specific ‘community elites’ tends to have more far-reaching consequences than that of other members, or even of state institutions. For example, for immigrant interest organisations it can be especially important to gain support from ethnic business entrepreneurs or local religious leaders in order to be regarded as a credible organisation by a specific immigrant constituency. Vermeulen and Brünger, studying the foundation and development of Turkish and Moroccan immigrant organisations in Amsterdam, found that very specific constituencies, based on ethnicity, religious denomination, and/or ideological affiliation, were crucial contributors for the organisations involved. The fact that the organisations were seen as legitimate actors for these groups was much more important than the perception of the general public.<sup>60</sup>

It is important to note that institutionalised normative expectations may differ in relation to a number of dimensions, including space and time. Marquis, Glynn and Davis, for example, showed how the basis of legitimacy for organisations may change across cities and bounded communities, and therefore that organisational legitimacy also has a spatial dimension. Local understandings, norms, and rules can serve as touchstones for organisational activity in

57 Walter Nicholls, ‘Making undocumented immigrants into a legitimate political subject: theoretical observations from the United States and France’, *Theory, Culture & Society* 30:3 (2013) 82–107.

58 Nicholls, ‘Making undocumented immigrants into a legitimate political subject’, 91.

59 Angie Chung, Irene Bloemraad and Karen Tejada-Pena, ‘Reinventing an authentic “ethnic” politics: Ideology and organizational change in Koreatown and Field’s Corner’, *Ethnicities* 13:6 (2013) 838–862.

60 Floris Vermeulen and Martijn Brünger, ‘The organisational legitimacy of immigrant groups: Turks and Moroccans in Amsterdam’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 40:7 (2014) 979–1001.

a community. In their research, they argue that organisational templates vary from community to community, making some types of organisations more legitimate in one community than in another. Such variation, at least in the US context, stems from a number of historical, demographical, and geographical factors – for instance, the historical migratory and settlement patterns of different ethnic and religious groups, each of whom brings unique frames for what constitutes a legitimate organisational form.<sup>61</sup> Vermeulen, Minkoff, and Van der Meer showed how neighbourhood characteristics affect the spatial dimension of organisational legitimacy among voluntary organisations in Amsterdam's neighbourhoods.<sup>62</sup> According to the authors, neighbourhoods are concrete spaces wherein urban residents can interact, produce social norms and articulate a distinctive social order. For certain immigrant organisations, particularly those that engage in broad advocacy and support or self-define themselves as an ethnic organisation, citywide interorganisational networks with other local organisations may be more salient than a strong embeddedness in a particular neighbourhood. However, for specific organisations, such as recreation or service providers (football clubs, billiards associations, drama clubs, children's circus groups and gardening associations), which may cater to immigrants as part of the neighbourhood population, their very legitimacy may be tied to specific neighbourhoods (and their specific social configuration). In fact, Vermeulen, Laméris, and Minkoff found that, for these types of recreational organisations, certain demographics, such as percentages of immigrants or children in the neighbourhood, have an effect on organisational survival rates. The authors accounted for this by referring to the neighbourhoods' deeper set of shared frameworks on legitimate organisational forms and behaviours, which accumulate through everyday interactions with other neighbourhood residents.<sup>63</sup>

Moreover, normative contexts may change over time, and force organisations to respond to this shift in order to survive. Zald and Denton's fascinating study of the Young Men's Christian Association in the US shows just that. The authors describe the transformation of the YMCA, from its inception in the mid-1800s as an evangelical Protestant organisation to its form in the mid-1960s, at which point it had become a more secular and market-oriented

---

61 Christopher Marquis, Mary Ann Glynn and Gerald F. Davis, 'Community isomorphism and corporate social action', *Academy of Management Review* 32:3 (2007) 925–945.

62 Vermeulen, Minkoff and Van der Meer, 'The local embedding'.

63 Floris Vermeulen, Joran Laméris and Debra Minkoff, 'Welcome to the neighbourhood: the spatial dimensions of legitimacy for voluntary leisure organisations', *Urban Studies* 53:11 (2016) 2253–2272.

organisation largely dependent on membership sales.<sup>64</sup> The study revealed how shifting values and beliefs in society – and particularly in the subgroup of members and related audiences who constituted the bulk of the organisation's support – point to patterns of organisational survival through change and adaptation.

Similarly, Forsythe and Rieffer-Flanagan, in their history of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), show how the organisation evolved from a small Swiss relief association, committed to Christian principles of compassion and devotion to the less fortunate, to a global humanitarian NGO justifying its intervention over a wide variety of issues through the mobilisation of notions of human dignity and human rights. Those changes can hardly be grasped without considering the broader societal changes that occurred during the 150 years since the ICRC's foundation, and which made it possible for the organisation to adapt while continuing to grow and expand its operations.<sup>65</sup> Changes may also occur as a result of more sudden policy shifts. We have already mentioned the case of Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese ethnic organisations emerging in Amsterdam in the 1980s in response to a new 'integrationist' multicultural policy promoted by the Dutch national and local governments. However, as Uitermark has documented,<sup>66</sup> immigrant organisations eschewing ethnic logics and rather emphasising a multi-ethnic, class-based (or work-based) identity had been present in the city since the 1970s. While the Dutch government initially supported those organisations, as it shifted policy focus it also began to question the legitimacy of organisations that were not organised along ethnic lines. If some organisations responded by embracing the new turn, those who were unwilling or unable to conform to the new normative expectations of local (and national authorities) were excluded from access to both resources (funding) and political influence (involvement in consultative or advisory fora, etc.), eventually disbanding.

64 The organisation is still active and has continued to change over the last few decades. In their latest efforts to distance themselves from their initial faith-based character, they have come to embrace issues such as sustainable development, gender equality or racism. As of 2010, the US branch of YMCA has also adopted a new logo and it is now simply known as 'The Y': Mayer Zald and Patricia Denton, 'From evangelism to general service: The transformation of the YMCA', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 8:2 (1963) 214–234.

65 David Forsythe and Barbara Ann Rieffer-Flanagan, *The international committee of the Red Cross. A neutral humanitarian actor* (New York 2007).

66 Walter Nicholls and Justus Uitermark, *Cities and social movements. Immigrant rights activism in the United States, France, and the Netherlands, 1970–2015* (Malden 2016). See especially chapter 5 and 8.

#### 4 Organisational Agency in Legitimation Strategies: Institutional and Contingent Perspectives

In this section, we analyse the legitimation process from the organisations' point of view. We suggest two ways of addressing the issue of organisational agency in legitimacy. The first draws on an institutional approach examining legitimation and legitimacy largely in relation to organisational survival and change, and how that relates to long-term, broad changes in societal norms and values. The second draws on a notion of legitimation as an inherently contested and contingent process, negotiated in everyday activities and mainly in relation to concrete organisational actions and decisions. Both views, although to quite different degrees, are consistent with a perception of organisations as relatively autonomous agents with the capacity to both reproduce and contest existing structures.<sup>67</sup>

The institutional approach generally splits the legitimation process into three phases: 1) the securing of legitimacy; 2) its maintenance; 3) its reparation in case of loss.<sup>68</sup> Along these lines, organisational legitimacy roughly equals conformity to generalised and institutionalised expectations about appropriate organisational goals, missions and form. However, a notable exception is the initial stage of a development of an organisational field, when pioneer organisations led by skilled *institutional entrepreneurs* are first and foremost engaged in making their organisation comprehensible, that is in developing a sense that a new sector 'objectively exists independently of specific organisations'.<sup>69</sup> During this period they also must engage in sustained outreach to publicise their activities, thereby creating a constituency or target audience and persuading legitimate entities to provide support to enhance their overall legitimacy. Unlike large political institutions, organisations have to compete for their legitimacy with similar organisations in other domains (e.g. advocacy organisations vs. community-based organisations in the broader NGO sector), and therefore need to actively *promote* their organisational type as valuable and worthy of support. New organisations may also fail to gain recognition because they lack reputational indicators, such as organisational or individual

67 Elisabeth Clemens and James M. Cook, 'Politics and institutionalism: explaining durability and change', *Annual Review of Sociology* 25:1 (1999) 441–466.

68 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy'; Ashforth and Gibbs, 'The double-edge of organizational legitimation'; Kimberly Elsbach and Robert Sutton, 'Acquiring organizational legitimacy through illegitimate actions: a marriage of institutional and impression management theories', *Academy of Management Journal* 35:4 (1992) 699–738.

69 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy', 586.

track records, which can often effectively back particular claims with the reasonable promise of appropriate performance. Since some organisational forms may be too different from existing ones within specific contexts, these organisations may initially suffer from what organisational ecologists have called the 'liability of newness'.<sup>70</sup> However, once an organisational field is established, social actors come to recognise certain organisational forms or templates, along with their associated features, as being natural within a given order of arrangements. As long as an institutionalised organisational field already exists and has produced a recognised organisational template, new organisations may achieve a first level of legitimacy by simply adopting this template.<sup>71</sup> We illustrate the legitimisation process from the organisations' point of view partly by referring to one of our research projects on the history of immigrant rights organisations in Los Angeles. In this project the long-term legitimating strategies of two immigrant Korean organisations active in LA are studied over the last three decades. Gnes relied on a number of data sources to conduct his project, most importantly several archives (grant applications to a major funding organisation and related material); interviews with former and current staff; and public organisational material available online (internal reports, press releases, newsletters, and other digital information).<sup>72</sup>

In his comparative study of the history of the Korean Resource Center (KRC) and the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), Gnes showed that organisational founders adopted two diverging strategies of legitimisation. In the case of KRC, founders and successive organisational staff legitimised the organisation to their external audiences, particularly funders, by claiming to represent a community defined in ethnic terms. In so doing, they conformed to established normative expectations regarding the form and practices of immigrant organisations in the country, particularly with respect to the intrinsic value of ethnic representation and its institutionalisation in US urban politics. In the case of KIWA, however, the organisational founders attempted to legitimise its existence through a claim to represent a multi-ethnic and class-based constituency, namely a Latino-Korean 'immigrant working class'. Since this type of organisation was not very common, particularly at a time when social conflict was heavily framed in ethnic terms, it also required KIWA to engage in considerable efforts to make the organisation comprehensible and worthy of

---

70 Stinchcombe, *Constructing social theories*.

71 Meyer and Rowan, 'Institutionalized organizations'.

72 Davide Gnes, 'Organisational legitimacy beyond ethnicity? Shifting organisational logics in the struggle for immigrant rights in Los Angeles', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 42:9 (2016) 1420–1438, 1424.

support from external audiences. In this respect, incubation of like-minded organisations and collaboration with other pioneer organisations was instrumental in legitimising not only the single organisation but its broader organisational form, which became known as the immigrant *worker centre*.

As Suchman stated, all legitimisation strategies ‘involve complex mixtures of concrete organisational change and persuasive organisational communication’.<sup>73</sup> In fact, within a more managerial view of legitimacy, organisations are seen as strategic agents that can purposefully manipulate the surrounding environment. Organisational requirements need not always be substantial and fundamental, as organisations may simply be required to ‘adopt certain highly visible and salient practices that are consistent with social expectations, while leaving the essential machinery of the organisation intact’.<sup>74</sup> Consider, for example, the widespread diffusion of ethics and corporate social responsibility departments in corporations or the adoption of standards and certifications provided by gatekeepers and labelling institutions in highly formalised and institutionalised environments. In the case of KIWA and KRC, this meant for example adopting organisational formal structures required by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to be granted 501(c)(3) non-profit status.<sup>75</sup> While receiving the status of a charitable organisation was important for both KIWA and KRC for fundraising purposes, and particularly for them to be seen as legitimate civil society actors by foundations, it also helped these organisations deflect their opponents’ claims of political radicalism or of not being invested in the public interest.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, the

---

73 Suchman, ‘Managing legitimacy’.

74 Ashforth and Gibbs, ‘The double-edge of organizational legitimation’, 181.

75 The 501(c)(3) status regulates eligibility criteria for voluntary organisations who wish to acquire a non-profit status for the purpose of tax exemption and tax deductibility in the US. Organisations have to provide the IRS with documentation that attests the type and scope of their activities, shows the existence of a managerial structure (e.g. a board of directors, and an executive director), and reassures the agency that public money will not be (primarily) used for activities such as political lobbying, legislative campaigning or candidate support.

76 The list of organisations who may be eligible for 501(c)(3) status includes charitable, religious, educational, scientific, and few others organisational types. As stated by the IRS on its <https://www.irs.gov/>: ‘the term *charitable* is used in its generally accepted legal sense and includes relief of the poor, the distressed, or the underprivileged; advancement of religion; advancement of education or science; erecting or maintaining public buildings, monuments, or works; lessening the burdens of government; lessening neighbourhood tensions; eliminating prejudice and discrimination; defending human and civil rights secured by law; and combating community deterioration and juvenile delinquency’.

very small size of those organisations, the largely ceremonial role played by the board of directors, as well as the intrinsic 'political' nature of the mission of both organisations did weaken 501(c)(3) status constraints in their day-to-day work.<sup>77</sup>

According to this understanding of legitimacy, once legitimisation has been established, it requires relatively little effort to maintain. Thus, the existence of particular organisations comes to be taken for granted. Legitimation work is therefore mainly directed towards maintaining the appearance that 'business is running as usual', as well as monitoring possible changes in the normative expectations of the different audiences targeted by organisations. Loss of legitimacy is therefore viewed with a long-term perspective, being tied only to an 'unforeseen crisis of meaning' in light of changed values and beliefs of targeted audiences, and *not* in relation to specific issues of performance or decisions.<sup>78</sup> For organisational staff, it is therefore crucial to anticipate challenges and be alert to environmental changes, providing reassurances to audiences while simultaneously preparing the terrain for possible changes in strategy. 'Risk assessment' and 'crisis management' are hence new buzzwords in the NGO sector, mirroring the language of for-profit organisations. For example, an organisation rooted in a specific neighbourhood may witness major demographic changes in the area as an effect of economic downturns or gentrification. The arrival of people of different ethnic or racial backgrounds, age cohorts or income brackets can also significantly affect the viability of specific organisations as they influence the area's prevailing normative expectations.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, the Los Angeles neighbourhood of 'Koreatown' – so named by the municipality in 1980 due to the predominance of Korean-owned businesses – went through significant demographic changes as the Korean American second generation came of age and new immigrants from Mexico and Central America, many of them undocumented, settled in and joined a pre-existing African American community. The area, part of an inner city core where economic opportunities and housing conditions deteriorated dramatically between the 1970s and 1980s as a result of economic restructuring processes and institutional disinvestment, gained nationwide notoriety in 1992 with the so-called civil unrest, during which Korean stores were looted and burned with impunity by other neighbourhood residents

77 Gnes, 'Organizational legitimacy beyond ethnicity?'; see also, Angie Chung, "Politics without the politics": The evolving political cultures of ethnic Non-Profits in Koreatown, Los Angeles', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 31:5 (2005) 911–929.

78 Suchman, 'Managing legitimacy'; Ashforth and Gibbs, 'The double-edge of organizational legitimation'.

(primarily African Americans and Latinos).<sup>79</sup> The event, heavily mediated as an ethnically-motivated conflict, not only triggered a process of deep reflection within the local Korean immigrant community, but also contributed to opening up the area to new social actors and new normative expectations. If up until then Korean immigrant organisations had been mainly self-reliant, and legitimated themselves by appealing to the normative expectations of the South Korean government and the first-generation immigrant business community,<sup>80</sup> the civil unrest attracted the interest in the area of LA institutions and progressive civil society organisations (namely foundations, advocacy groups, service organisations, etc.). KRC and KIWA, established (in the mid-1980s and 1991–1992, respectively) by a 1.5 immigrant generation of activists that rejected the conservative views of the ‘old guard’, strategically adapted their organisational narratives to incorporate a progressive analysis of the causes of the unrest. If KRC emphasised that the Korean community was being scapegoated for the failures of US society in integrating its most disadvantaged members, KIWA focused on building bridges with Latino and African American communities by emphasising their common marginalisation and exploitation as peoples of colour.<sup>81</sup> Those readings resonated powerfully with those young Korean Americans who, socialised in progressive local universities (such as UCLA) and particularly sensitive to issues of racial and ethnic discrimination, viewed first generation organisations as completely inadequate to deal with the social conflict that was unfolding in the neighbourhood.<sup>82</sup> As the Koreatown neighbourhood became more open to external influences, this framing also allowed KIWA and KRC to partner up with progressive private foundations, who were attracted by KIWA’s and KRC’s message of social inclusion and cross-ethnic collaboration. Moreover, in the case of KIWA, this framing allowed the organisation to reach out to the growing Latino immigrant population in the neighbourhood and expand their membership base.<sup>83</sup>

---

79 Angie Chung, *Legacies of struggle: conflict and cooperation in Korean American politics* (Stanford 2007).

80 The leadership of the Korean community in Koreatown, mainly consisting of first-generation immigrants, was generally Christian, politically conservative on social issues, business-oriented and inward-looking (largely disinterested in meddling with local LA politics). Much of their economic and political support came from the South Korean government, particularly through the South Korean consulate. See Chung, ‘Legacies of struggle’.

81 Gnes, ‘Organizational legitimacy beyond ethnicity?’.

82 Chung, Bloemraad and Tejada-Pena, ‘Reinventing an authentic “ethnic” politics’.

83 Gnes, ‘Organizational legitimacy beyond ethnicity?’.



Legitimacy is most evident when absent. Open criticism and questioning often signal that an organisation has lost – or may be in the process of losing – its legitimacy for some audiences. A lack of legitimacy occurs when an organisation has failed to recognise the lost cultural support for its activities.<sup>84</sup> Threatened legitimacy may be hard to overcome, especially if previous legitimisation strategies have already been discredited. It may also trigger a cascade reaction, which pushes former organisational allies and supporters to distance themselves so as to avoid their own delegitimation.<sup>85</sup> Organisations may still be able to protect their legitimacy so long as they enjoy even a sliver of credibility and support among relevant audiences. Responding to these circumstances, organisations thus often employ a mix of substantive changes and strong symbolic management. This may include directly denying the misrepresentation of organisational activities, but also emphasising re-explanations of past organisational activities that retroactively present them in light of the changed system of values. Typical actions of symbolic management of legitimisation include providing *accounts*, which ‘are explanations designed to remove one from a situation that may reflect unfavourably on one’s image or claims to legitimacy’.<sup>86</sup> Those accounts often include excuses, such as the attribution of unfavourable outcomes to unexpected or external events, but also justifications that minimise the negative outcome. Other actions include offering *apologies*, an action that acknowledges the organisation’s own responsibility while still attempting to maintain some credibility towards target audiences. Directors of NGOs may argue in public information leaflets or letters to their supporters that unfavourable outcomes, or continuing suffering of their constituency are due to external, unstable, and uncontrollable causes. They provide these excuses, apologies or justifications to regain their own legitimacy and counter internal or external criticism.

An institutional perspective on legitimacy tends to emphasise long-term processes, and underscores the role that institutionalised expectations about organisational forms and their related goals and procedures play in securing the survival of organisations as templates (or forms). Another view, however, sees legitimacy in more contingent terms, relating it to how organisations concretely justify their actions and decisions in everyday political interaction. While this view does not neglect the role of institutionalised expectations, it also considers the more fluid and dynamic subjective orientations of the different social actors involved, and does not discount the role that trust, rational

---

84 Meyer and Scott, ‘Centralization and the legitimacy problems of local government’.

85 Suchman, ‘Managing legitimacy’.

86 Ashforth and Gibbs, ‘The double-edge of organizational legitimation’, 181.

argumentation and emotions play in the everyday legitimation process. Building on Weber's legacy, Netelenbos has suggested that, beside socially valid beliefs (of appropriate or comprehensible organisational form), it is important to account for how actors, and therefore organisations, mobilise and sustain feelings of obedience, support or agreement among their individual subordinates, followers or opponents.<sup>87</sup>

This may involve complex strategies of dramaturgical *storytelling* or reality *framing*, through which organisations attempt to mobilise a wide range of arguments – those may be rational arguments, or rather intuitive ones with a strong emotional component – in the hope that they resonate with their audiences.<sup>88</sup> This is particularly important when organisations require a very high level of commitment and risk from activists and militants, or when political polarisation tends to fragment societal consensus on accepted forms of political or societal engagement. Nicholls, in his study of the undocumented immigrant rights movement in the US, showed how undocumented youths were able to influence the political debate, and achieve (temporary) legalisation, by presenting their situation in unique terms – as culturally integrated, long-term residents and successful students, sharing core American values with US citizens – which strongly resonated with public opinion. At the same time, the decision of many youths to 'come out of the shadows' and publicly acknowledge their condition as undocumented immigrants – a move which placed these youths at the concrete risk of being identified by law enforcement authorities and being deported – galvanised many other immigrants in similar situations across the country, encouraging more people to get politically involved and prompting the movement to grow rapidly.<sup>89</sup>

Usually organisations are very aware of both levels of the legitimation process – the institutional and the contingent one – and can be very strategic with respect to the selection of their audiences. Gnes described the complex process through which KIWA established the legitimacy of its goals and its contentious actions for multiple audiences with very different normative expectations. Founded by a South Korean-born activist with a strong Marxist background, the multi-ethnic immigrant advocacy organisation Koreatown, in Los Angeles, had to develop alternative rationales for its existence.

87 Netelenbos, *Political legitimacy beyond Weber*.

88 Francesca Polletta, *It was like a fever: Storytelling in protest and politics* (Chicago 2006); Robert Benford and David Snow, 'Framing processes and social movements: an overview and assessment', *Annual Review of Sociology* 26:1 (2000) 611–639.

89 Walter Nicholls, *The DREAMers: How the undocumented youth movement transformed the immigrant rights debate* (Palo Alto 2013).

Which rationale was elicited depended on whether the organisation was trying to obtain the support of local US labour unions, immigrant rights organisations or private funders, to recruit members among newly arrived immigrants from South Korea or Latin America or to gain neighbourhood recognition and acceptance from the Korean business community. Each strategy required toning down or emphasising specific aspects of the organisation, from its compliance with non-profit regulations to championing the immigrant working class, from its commitment to the Korean community's wellbeing to its rejection of 'Communism'. It also required KIWA to strategically seek different kinds of endorsements to enhance its legitimacy, from the local Korean 'ethnic' media to longstanding activists respected in the local activist scene, and from LA politicians to Korean religious ministers working in the neighbourhood.<sup>90</sup> However, as shown by the earlier example of the mosque construction in Amsterdam, reconciling different levels of the legitimation process may not always be possible. Ultimately, the diversity of views within the leadership and the need for the former to appease the rather diverging normative expectations of the liberal and cosmopolitan local authorities, on the one hand, and the religious and conservative membership on the other, proved to be insurmountable.<sup>91</sup>

It is important to remember that 'organisations become infused with the norms and values of the people who make them up, rather than simply being the expressions of actors' goals'.<sup>92</sup> Organisations are not simply social facts that abstractly conform to external expectations, but rather are sites of everyday normative negotiation and discussion among individuals. Organisations are constantly concerned about legitimacy and continually engage in legitimation management in relation to specific audiences. They wonder how changes in goals or activities will be perceived, whether they will affect organisational support and their credibility. However, they also weigh those considerations in relation to the organisational values and those who make up the organisation. We see this clearly in Del Valle's article exploring discussions within the non-governmental organisation Doctors Without Borders (MSF) concerning engagement in a search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean Sea. Confronted with the dilemma of whether or not to intervene to help migrants attempting to enter Europe by boat, some MSF staff argued that the operation would make the organisation 'too political' and that MSF would be overstepping the bounds of its general mission to provide medical assistance. Those in favour of helping the migrants stressed the organisation's commitment to

---

90 Gnes, 'Organizational legitimacy beyond ethnicity?.'

91 Nicholls and Vermeulen, 'Rights through the city'.

92 McQuarrie and Marwell, 'The missing organizational dimension in urban sociology', 260.

humanitarianism, arguing that the deaths of migrants at sea was a catastrophe demanding a more political intervention. Notably, among those who opposed the operation, there was concern about how the donors and subscribers, which constitute the bulk of the organisation's support, would evaluate MSF's new potential role. The organisation eventually decided to launch the operation, despite the prospect of losing members and donors as a result. While MSF lost the support of some members, its new role gave the organisation the chance to recruit new supporters who were emboldened by its more politicised commitment.<sup>93</sup>

We should also remember that while organisational performance is an important aspect of legitimisation strategies, goal accomplishment is not necessarily a component. Reality confronts us with several examples of organisations that continue to enjoy legitimacy and receive support, despite the fact that their stated goals are never achieved – e.g. to save people from poverty, stop war, hold states and companies accountable for climate change, etc. However, we can better grasp this contradiction by observing that organisational goals are generally guidelines for action (albeit vague ones) rather than concrete objectives to be attained, and are thus presented by the organisation to their supporters in this way. In a more fundamental sense, Netelenbos has argued that political actors, for which we may also include organisations, often attempt to mobilise support and loyalty by committing themselves to a cause).<sup>94</sup> But in so doing, they are not necessarily satisfying particular interests, but rather the *expectation* of this fulfilment, whose realisation is constantly postponed in the future. Moreover, organisations may try to break down those broad, practically unattainable objectives into smaller ones that can be somehow measured. Throughout their history, organisations such as KRC and KIWA have claimed that their goals are about fighting for social justice and immigrant rights, ending immigrant exploitation and racism, or giving a 'voice' to underprivileged segments of the immigrant community. The very indefiniteness of those goals has allowed them to redefine in practice what specific objectives they should have at a certain point in time, while still using ambitious idealistic goals as a powerful source of mobilisation (and identification) for activists. However, this does not mean there is no regular monitoring of achievement and performance. KIWA, for example, routinely produced reports (often in partnership with academics), as well as fliers and other documentation to demonstrate how the organisation was advancing social justice through its actions – e.g.

---

93 Hernan Del Valle, 'Search and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea: negotiating political differences', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35:2 (2016) 22–40.

94 Netelenbos, *Political legitimacy beyond Weber*.

reporting on the increase in compliance of minimum wage regulations among Korean restaurants in Koreatown following a particular campaign.<sup>95</sup>

Lastly, we should not forget that another level in which voluntary organisations become active agents is in the very construction of their relationship with a community. In making particular claims, organisations chiefly rely on their relationship with a community – members, volunteers, residents, inter alia – to justify the right to exist.<sup>96</sup> However, organisations do not make claims based on their supposedly neutral de facto representation of community interests. In doing so, they also contribute to the symbolic construction of this very group and its interests, highlighting some dimensions while downplaying others. In formulating different claims of community representation – for example by emphasising class and multi-ethnic solidarities, or rather by encouraging ethnic loyalties – organisations articulate ‘political projects’ that underscore the saliency of certain audiences and their concerns within a particular community.<sup>97</sup> This symbolic construction is not unique to organisations. Organisational criteria are rarely formulated outside of organisational templates or broader institutional categorisations available within specific contexts. They cannot be entirely disconnected from the experiential reality of their constituents. However, organisations have a relative autonomy in selecting and defining their internal audience, emphasising and over time even changing different criteria among them: ethnicity and race, geographical location, religious affiliation, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, identity, or a combination of these dimensions, and many more.

Considering once again the LA case study, we observe how Kwon found that KIWA redefined its constituency as the ‘residents and workers’ of Koreatown, thus grounding its legitimacy in the neighbourhood rather than a specific ethnic community. While this process was not disconnected from wider socio-economic dynamics of the neighbourhood – the increasing heterogeneity of the residents, the rising saliency of issues such as gentrification or affordable housing – it was largely directed by the organisation’s conscious decision to abandon more confrontational unionisation campaigns and to focus on urban redevelopment advocacy.<sup>98</sup> Within this process, it also strategically reframed

---

95 Gnes, ‘Organizational legitimacy beyond ethnicity?’.

96 Beetham, *The legitimation of power*.

97 Gnes, ‘Organizational legitimacy beyond ethnicity?’.

98 Jong Bum Kwon, ‘The Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliances: spatializing justice in an ethnic “enclave”’, in: Ruth Milkman, Joshua Bloom and Victor Narro (eds), *Working for justice: The L.A. model of organizing and advocacy* (Ithaca 2010) 23–48.

its message to attract support from new audiences, such as leaders of the local Korean business community.

## 5 Conclusion

Throughout this article we have underscored critical points to consider when analysing organisational legitimacy. We began by reviewing its basic definition, which organisational scholars have broadly defined as the level of cultural congruence of organisations with the environment in which they operate. Organisational legitimacy fulfils its most vital function for organisations as a *mediated resource*, providing access to other resources such as funds or labour. We suggested, however, that the link between legitimacy and access to resources is not always straightforward. Legitimacy may succeed in backing particular claims, but scale of preferences and level of resources – i.e. of audiences – will also matter for determining the level of support that organisations can successfully claim. Moreover, particular organisational claims, for example a claim of representation, are not only directed at securing support, but also at building organisational ‘moral’ authority (such as the power to influence political decisions). NGOs representing or supporting for instance refugees can influence the public opinion by claiming that only they can bring forward the viewpoints of an ignored and marginalised constituency. Public opinion in liberal democracies tends to partly assess such claims on moral grounds in a context that often appreciates or at least acknowledges plurality. Representing the underdog often provides some access to the public debate.

We then further examined the importance of the context in which the legitimisation process takes place. Borrowing from neo-institutional theory, we argued that organisational claims are largely evaluated according to institutionalised normative expectations. Those expectations dictate appropriate organisational structures and procedures in a given environment and suggest desirable organisational forms to achieve specific purposes. Concerning voluntary organisations in Western societies, we also suggested that democratic and market logics may both play a role in determining acceptable organisational forms, goals, and activities. We continued our analysis by analysing the role of audiences and addressed the question of which audiences matter the most for legitimisation and why. The direction of organisational goals, ideological considerations and resource inequalities all play a major part in directing organisations towards specific audiences.

Finally, we argue that the process of legitimisation should also incorporate an agentic perspective of the organisation in order to make sense of how NGOs

can offer an acceptable theory of themselves. Organisations have relative leverage in manipulating the environment and reconfiguring the network of audiences with whom they interact. Moreover, through strategic communication – involving appeals to emotions and rational argumentation – organisations are able to construct alternative accounts that are accepted as legitimate. Furthermore, legitimacy is also constantly appraised in micro-processes of negotiation and conflict. Organisations are constantly doing ‘legitimation work’ for strategic purposes, not only to legitimate their existence but to achieve concrete political objectives and counter power and resource inequalities.

These dynamics are highly complex, but we can begin to better understand them when we pay more attention to how NGOs are affected by their environment, as well as to how they contribute to shaping it. That is, how the quest for resources and legitimacy affects their organisational trajectory and their relationship with their primary constituents, but also how organisations themselves contribute to producing audiences and communities and articulating their interests and needs. As we approach the issue of legitimacy, we must remind ourselves that analysing legitimacy is not about the evaluation of particular normative expectations that we, as researchers or individuals, may hold or privilege. Instead, it is about how the normative assumptions of specific organisations are justified – or not – within a particular normative context and in relation to the expectations of particular audiences. Social historians, in this respect, are uniquely placed to analyse these different dimensions through a historical perspective: how legitimacy claims of organisations shift in parallel with broader societal changes in norms and values; how particular normative expectations may strongly depend on a given historical context; and how disruptive or innovative organisational claims may have a lasting influence in shaping criteria of legitimacy for particular organisational forms.