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Civil Society Organizations: Legitimizing the Common Good

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The authors explore the concepts of legitimacy and accountability in the academic literature. Specifically, they discuss how these concepts relate to Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and in what ways legitimacy is constructed, understood and represented in the Civil Society sector.

The key research questions addressed are: (1) In what ways is legitimacy understood and negotiated within Civil Society Organisations? (2) Does the current research and literature from other domains translate to the Civil Society sector? (3) What are the gaps in the literature?

The current discourse on legitimacy and accountability is largely shaped by literature informed by organisational and management studies. To better understand and explore the specific realities of Civil Society Organisations (and the complex expectations and demands they are facing), more flexible and relational understandings of legitimacy are needed. The authors advocate for more interdisciplinary research on the topic, which should include ongoing reflections of power dynamics and the role of stakeholders at multiple levels.

[#Legitimacy](#) [#CivilSociety](#) [#Accountability](#) [#NonProfitSector](#) [#CommonGood](#)

Background

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Context



- Academically, legitimacy can be **understood as a product** (i.e. a property that can be attained and measured), a **process** (i.e. an ongoing process of representing or constructing) and as **perception** (i.e. when an audience's perception and judgement of legitimacy is studied).
- Traditionally, much of the academic literature approaches legitimacy as a measurable (and often externally imposed) property. This perspective is informed in part by a management-logic and is, for example, implicit in many funders' Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting frameworks (used as a way to assess **whether a CSO is contributing to a «Common Good» ideal**).
- The less common understanding of legitimacy and **accountability as ongoing processes** puts a stronger focus on interactions, negotiations and the social construction of ideas around what legitimacy and accountability can mean in different contexts.
- Questions of legitimacy and accountability are often tied to **power structures** when it comes to who gets to decide how legitimacy is defined and who accountability is owed to. The authors distinguish between the understanding of **“top-down” legitimacy** (where a more powerful entity such as a donor is “owed” accountability) and more flexible forms of **“downward accountability”** (more participatory accountability and legitimacy vis-à-vis various stakeholders and beneficiaries instead).



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Take aways & Learnings



- **Complexity of Legitimacy in CSOs:** Legitimacy is not a one-dimensional concept or expectation. Rather, it can be constructed and understood in many different ways and is highly context-dependant. CSOs may be negotiating and deferring to many different expectations from different stakeholders at once.
- **Multidisciplinary Perspective:** The debates and approaches informed by more traditional management and business logics do not always translate directly to the CSO sector. CSOs should be understood in their specific contexts and not (only) in terms of managerialism, professionalism and market-based approaches. CSOs should be understood through an interdisciplinary lens and their diversity/peculiarities should be taken into account, both scientifically and in order to properly understand and support them.
- **Legitimacy and Accountability as expressions of power dynamics:** Legitimacy and Accountability is often implicitly or explicitly imposed or expected by external, more powerful entities. CSOs often face pressure from external stakeholders and find themselves needing to fulfil different expectations in order to be perceived as “legitimate”.
- **Shifting understandings of legitimacy:** Academic discourse is shifting towards more dynamic and process-oriented perspectives on legitimacy. Rather than viewing legitimacy as a static property or perception, these perspectives emphasize the ongoing negotiation and construction of legitimacy through social processes and power dynamics.

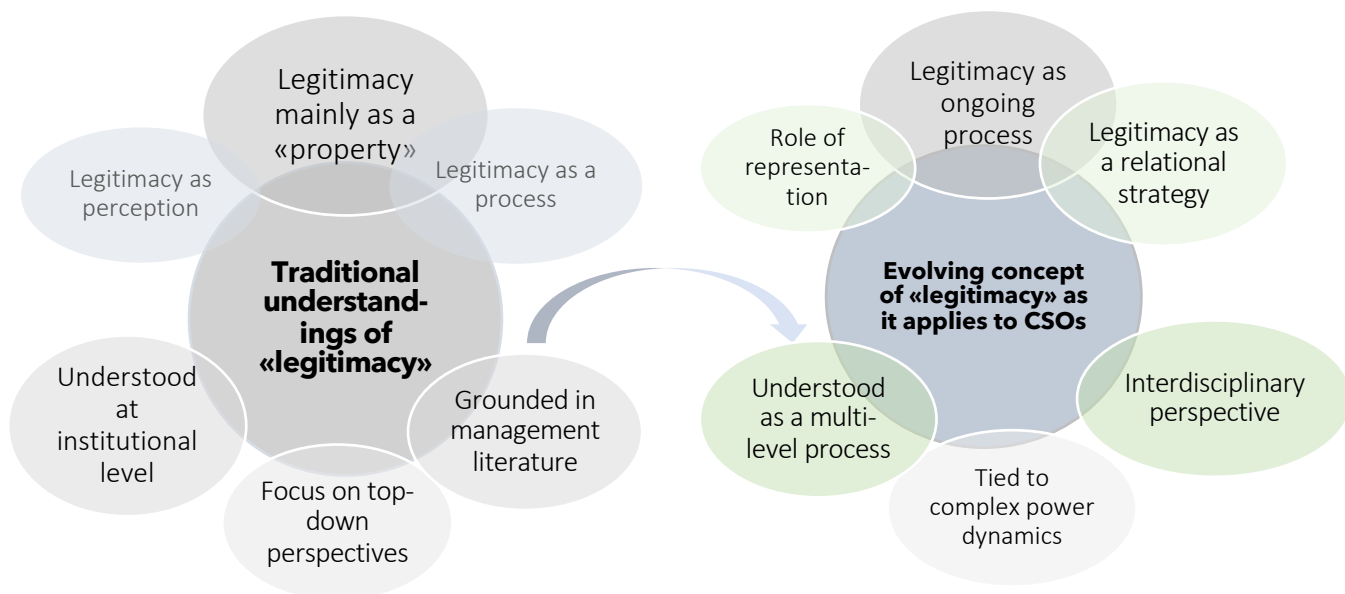


Fig 1: Refining of the concept of «legitimacy» and its application to Civil Society Organisations.

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