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# Stuck in a “Catch-22”: Why Donors Fail to Include Grassroots Perspectives on CSO Legitimacy

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## Abstract

Studies on CSO legitimacy highlight the undermining effect of incorporation in the aid system. It remains unclear, however, why donors continue to fund local CSOs lacking grassroots legitimacy. This article examines the case of an East African CSO that continues to attract donors despite being considered illegitimate by the grassroots. The research identifies six legitimacy sources: professionalism, agenda, strategy, track record, membership and governance. It finds that donors and grassroots interpret the first three sources (professionalism, agenda and strategy) in an opposing manner. Thus, the exact same characteristics that provide donor legitimacy simultaneously bring grassroots illegitimacy. The article subsequently identifies three mechanisms that explain why a lack of grassroots legitimacy is not a problem for donors: (1) donor priorities and capacities; (2) the CSO’s monopoly position; and (3) perception management by the CSO. Overall, these findings highlight structural limitations of the aid system.

**Keywords** Legitimacy · Aid system · Civil society organisations · Donors · Grassroots

## Resumé

Les études au sujet de la légitimité des organisations de la société civile (OSC) mettent en évidence la façon dont, pour les OSC, leur inclusion dans le système d’aide au développement vient ébranler leur légitimité. L’on ignore cependant pourquoi les bailleurs de fonds continuent de financer des OSC locales qui manquent de légitimité

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aux yeux des communautés locales. Cet article examine le cas d'une OSC d'Afrique de l'Est qui continue d'attirer les financements des bailleurs de fonds alors même que les communautés locales ne la considèrent pas comme étant légitime. L'étude identifie six sources de légitimité: le professionnalisme, le programme, la stratégie, l'historique des actions, l'adhésion des membres et la gouvernance. Elle constate que les bailleurs de fonds et les communautés locales interprètent de manière opposée les trois premières sources de légitimité (le professionnalisme, le programme et la stratégie). Ainsi, les caractéristiques qui confèrent une légitimité aux yeux des bailleurs de fonds entraînent simultanément l'illégitimité aux yeux des communautés locales. L'article identifie par la suite trois mécanismes qui expliquent pourquoi un manque de légitimité aux yeux des communautés locales n'est pas un problème pour les bailleurs de fonds: (1) les priorités et le niveau de capacité des bailleurs de fonds; (2) la position de monopole des OSC; et (3) la gestion de sa propre perception par l'OSC en question. Dans l'ensemble, ces résultats mettent en évidence les limites structurelles du système d'aide au développement.

**JEL Classification** I3 Welfare · Well-being · Poverty

## Introduction

For CSOs claiming to speak on behalf of marginalised populations, legitimacy is a matter of particular importance because, unlike many governments, their accountability does not ascend from democratic processes. As a result, CSOs require legitimacy to ensure political, economic and moral backing and to protect themselves from opponents (Rubenstein 2014). Within developments studies, the term remains vaguely defined, so its application to CSOs has mostly relied on organisational theory (Lister 2003). The most well-known definition of organisational legitimacy is by Suchman (1995), who describes it as “a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). This description contains two important ideas: (1) that certain organizational attributes or behaviours can be seen as sources of legitimacy, and (2) the importance of the interpretations of sources in the (social) construction of legitimacy.

A prominent view is that grassroots support and beneficiary connections are “the most salient source” of CSO legitimacy more generally (Banks et al. 2015, p. 710). This idea holds true predominantly because the *raison d'être* of civil society is to promote the interests and concerns of citizens (Appel 2017). This reasoning would imply that CSOs are only worth supporting if they have grassroots legitimacy. Paradoxically, the literature shows that incorporation in the aid system can actually result in the undermining of this legitimacy (Wallace et al. 2006; Mitlin et al. 2007; Elbers and Arts 2011).

To our knowledge, however, there is no research that seeks to understand why donors continue to fund local CSOs that lack grassroots legitimacy. The very fact that they do so highlights a contradiction between donor thinking and their practices.



Donors promote Southern CSOs partly based on the assumption that they have stronger connections and thus legitimacy among local groups. Working with Southern CSOs enables donors to bridge the gap isolating them from the grassroots and thereby contribute to sustainable and effective interventions. Examining why donors continue to fund local CSOs that lack grassroots legitimacy despite the felt need to reach the grassroots is crucial because it sheds new light on the structural limitations of the aid system.

This paper examines the case of an East African disability rights CSO which continues to attract increasing donor interest and funding, but which suffers a crisis of legitimacy among many persons with disabilities at the grassroots level. The latter do not regard it as their legitimate representative: "[The CSO] does not talk for us", said a Deaf rights activist, summarising the widespread perception among the grassroots, hundreds of whom turn to social media platforms to express their frustration, even threatening to overturn the organisation and hold their own elections for new leadership. This CSO therefore provides an ideal case with which not only to explore opposing perceptions of legitimacy but also why ultimately grassroots perspectives seem to play a marginal role for donors.

This paper asks two questions: (1) what are the sources of the CSO's (il)legitimacy in the eyes of donors and the grassroots?, and (2) why is the lack of grassroots legitimacy not a problem for donors? In contrast to other aid system studies, this paper systematically examines the different (and opposing) ways in which donors and the grassroots perceive the legitimacy of the same CSO.

The paper makes two key contributions. First, it shows that donors have an universalist view of legitimacy which does not consider the notion that other stakeholders (including the grassroots) may perceive CSO legitimacy differently. Second, it shows that donors (who lack direct contact with the grassroots) rely on CSOs for views and perceptions from the grassroots, while their own legitimacy criteria simultaneously alienate these CSOs from the grassroots. As a consequence, donors not only fail to bridge the gap between themselves and the grassroots but run the risk of actually enlarging it.

The remainder of this paper consists of four parts. We first consider the ways in which CSO legitimacy has been examined in the literature. The paper continues by describing our case and methodology. This is followed by the findings with regard to the sources of (il)legitimacy and the question of why donors continue to fund the CSO despite being perceived as illegitimate by the grassroots. We end with the main conclusion and discussion.

## Legitimacy in the Literature

A key distinction in the literature is whether studies take the socially constructive nature of CSO legitimacy into account. A number of studies do not and essentially adopt an universal interpretation of legitimacy sources. Atack (1999) claims that CSOs need accountability mechanisms, operational effectiveness and empowerment successes to be seen as legitimate. Brown and Jagadananda (2007) argue that CSOs need to be seen as compliant with regulations, grounded in social norms



and delivering gains to stakeholder to secure their legitimacy. Elbers and Schulpen (2015) point out that the legitimacy of international CSOs is increasingly questioned due to their inability to represent people and organisations in the global South and pursue equal partnerships. Appe (2016) shows that civil society networks in Latin America use managerial practices to legitimacy, Lehr-Lehnardt (2005) suggests that CSOs need to be transparent and democratic in order to garner legitimacy, and Andia and Chorev (2017) assert that CSOs' knowledge and prestige is crucial in establishing legitimacy in advocacy campaigns.

Many scholars have examined the unintended consequences of CSOs' accountability to donors on their legitimacy. These authors implicitly view legitimacy sources as static resources that CSOs can retain, which are subsequently lost through participation in the formal aid system. Banks et al. (2015) claim that CSOs' adherence to restrictive rules have allowed CSOs to succeed in their service delivery function, but at the expense of their legitimacy as political advocates. Parks (2008) finds that Asian CSOs adapt their priorities to those of donors to secure funding, which weakens their popular legitimacy (see also Ossewaarde et al. 2008; Chahim and Prakash 2014). Zajontz and Leysens (2015) show how Southern African CSOs' shifts towards professionalism satisfies donors but alienates them from local groups.

In contrast to the universal approach are those authors who point out that legitimacy is a socially constructed concept which is perceived according to the interests and perspectives of particular audiences in particular times and places. Collingwood and Logister (2005) examine how understandings of CSO legitimacy among academics and professionals have changed over time, as initial proclamations about their "radical potential" have in recent decades turned to scepticism. Furthermore, Hudson (2001) claims that CSOs' legitimacy is context- and location-specific as it is contingent upon the ideas of different states and communities, which can cause challenges for CSOs who operate transnationally.

Some empirical studies take a social constructivist view by reviewing legitimacy from the perspective of a specific stakeholder. Gleiss (2014) found that Chinese labour NGO staff believe their organisational legitimacy comes from working as social and not political actors, giving a voice to grassroots migrant workers, and emphasising their specialist knowledge. Hudson (2002) found that UK NGO employees view their relationships with Southern partners as their primary source of legitimacy, while Popplewell (2018) claims that the Burundian government are more willing to tolerate CSOs perceived as legitimate. Wood (2016) argues that the Kenyan government may not take the legitimacy of donor-funded CSOs seriously because they regard them as acting on behalf of Western interests.

Other studies approach the subject from the opinions of donors, including Suárez and Gugerty (2016) who conclude that donors are more inclined to confer legitimacy on Cambodian CSOs that have adopted managerial practices, and Kamstra and Schulpen (2015) who suggest that donors see professionalism as a source of Ghanaian and Indonesian CSOs' legitimacy. Finally, Puljek-Shank (2018) looks at CSOs in Bosnia-Herzegovina that enjoy high legitimacy with donors and compares them to CSOs that have high legitimacy with citizens, finding that donors prefer CSOs with project management experience and English-speaking skills, whereas citizens prefer CSOs who engage in contentious politics and are experts on advocacy strategies.



## The Case Study

Persons with disabilities are the world's largest minority, accounting for an estimated 15% of the global population (WHO and World Bank 2011). In East Africa, as in many parts of the world, persons with disabilities are a marginalised group, living in poverty to a disproportionate extent due to lower access to education and employment (Ingstad and Eide 2011). Socio-cultural stigmatisation can be strong, especially in rural areas, where traditional beliefs often attribute the causes of disability to parents' sin or witchcraft. With the exception of South Sudan, five of the six members of the East African Community (EAC), namely Burundi, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, have ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and in addition the EAC Treaty acknowledges the importance of provisioning for persons with disabilities. However, these formal agreements are not always adequately monitored or enforced in practice (Chilemba 2015).

There is a wide consortium of stakeholders working on disability rights in East Africa, ranging from international and regional advocacy bodies, national government ministries and departments, local governments, donors, civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and disabled persons' organisations (DPOs). DPOs are "representative organisations or groups of persons with disabilities" where persons with disabilities "constitute a majority of the overall staff, board, and volunteers in all levels of the organisation" (disabilityrightsfund.org). Some DPOs are large, well-established and professionalised advocacy organisations that operate at the national level with a membership of hundreds of people. The majority of DPOs in East Africa, however, are localised community self-help groups that contain a few dozen members with disabilities as well as parents and caregivers of children with disabilities. The primary objective of these grassroots DPOs is to look after the common needs and interests of members through emotional and economic support.

The CSO in this study was established in the 1980s and has become a key player in disability advocacy in the East African country where the research takes place. The CSO was founded by a charismatic leader who united more than 100 disabled people's organisations in the country representing different impairment types. Especially in the first decade of its existence, the CSO had a strong grassroots orientation, worked tirelessly to unite different disability groups and contributed greatly to the eventual instalment of new legislation for persons with disabilities in the early 2000s.

The organisation is membership-based and members consist of DPOs that range from large national DPOs to small community-based DPOs from across the country. The CSO's main objectives are to strengthen the advocacy capacity of DPOs, to work with power holders on disability-inclusive policies, and to increase public awareness around disability. The CSO's activities have included monitoring election processes to be accessible for persons with disabilities, supporting inclusive education policies, and promoting the participation of women with disabilities in governance.



The CSO has one national office located in the capital city. At the time of research, the CSO employed a total of ten employees, although during the years 2010 to 2015 the number of staff fluctuated between seven and fifteen. In 2018, donor funding accounted for over 99% of the CSO's total income. Between 2014 and 2018, the CSO was funded by thirteen different donors, with several of these donors providing funding for more than one project. Of these, two are multilateral donors, three are bilateral donors, five are international NGOs, two are philanthropic trusts and one is a national government body. The projects ranged in duration from 6 months to 3 years and the grant amounts varied from USD 10,000 to USD 1,000,000. In recent years, donors have been providing increasingly large amounts to the CSO. In the years 2015 and 2016, the CSO's average annual budget was approximately USD 120,000, whereas in 2017 and 2018 it had grown to around USD 500,000.

## Methodology

Given the highly sensitive nature of the research, the study employed a qualitative methodology (Punch 2014). Data was collected in the East African country over a six-month field research period in 2018. In total, forty-five semi-structured interviews and seven focus groups took place, with individuals from three types of stakeholders: the case study CSO, donors and DPOs. Interviews with CSO employees were held with all members of the management and secretariat staff, as well as board members and former employees. Desk space was provided at the CSO's office which allowed for extensive observation and informal discussions with staff. Also participating in the study were eight donor agencies who have provided the CSO with funding in recent years, of which three are bilateral donors, two are NGOs, one is a multilateral donor, one is a philanthropic trust and one is a national government agency. Research participants from donor organisations were determined through purposive sampling (Ritchie et al. 2003), whereby we gained access through introduction from the CSO's staff.

For the purposes of this article, the term "grassroots" will refer to the people that the CSO formally claims to represent, namely all persons with disabilities in the corresponding country. Persons with disabilities often organise themselves at the local level into DPOs, and these DPOs formed the start of the selection process. We reached out to DPOs in two ways, the first of which was by introduction from the CSO, and the second was through contacting those who were seen to be active in discussions about the CSO on social media platforms. In combination, these two routes enabled us to capture the diversity of grassroots views of the CSO which helped to combat potential biases and afforded opportunities for triangulation. All grassroots interviewees were either chairpersons or members of a total of twenty-seven grassroots DPOs, and therefore have knowledge on disability issues, are involved in disability activism and are in contact with others in the disability community. Many of them gave names of new people to speak to, allowing for a snowball sampling method to further identify additional interview participants (Ritchie et al. 2003).



Forty-nine persons with disabilities were interviewed in total, fifteen of whom participated in a one-on-one interview and thirty-four of whom sat together in one of seven focus group interviews. We attempted to interview a variety of both member and non-member DPOs: of the twenty-seven grassroots DPOs represented in the study, four were members of the CSO at the time of the research, two DPOs were former members of the CSO but had stopped renewing their membership subscription, and twenty-one DPOs had never joined the CSO, for any number of reasons, whether it be disinterest, dissatisfaction or lack of money. Thirteen DPOs have received support from the CSO through participating in a donor-funded project, and fourteen have not. Geographically speaking, the research took place in the capital city and three provincial locations, which were selected on the basis that the organisation is active and well-known in these areas, and that they were feasible to access.

Data was also gathered from secondary sources, namely document analysis of organisational reports and strategic plans, project proposals and reports and donor contracts, and of social media posts on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Data was analysed through a process of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2015). Collection of data continued until "saturation" was reached and findings no longer added to the formation of categories and their relationships (Spencer et al. 2003).

The researchers made conscious efforts throughout to assemble data with veracity and limit the potential harm that could arise from the study. Participating donors and grassroots DPOs were given equal time in interviews and were asked similar questions that mainly covered the CSO's history, its activities, its performance and its reputation. Since there are more DPOs than donor organisations, DPOs in the study outnumber donors. However, care has been taken to present the perspectives of both groups in this paper in equal measure. Names have been protected to avoid attribution of comments to participants. Furthermore, the case study and the country in which the CSO is operational are anonymised to disguise the identity of the CSO, donors and DPOs.

## **Sources of (Il)legitimacy**

This section explores six characteristics of the CSO, and analyses why donors view these positively as sources of legitimacy, while the grassroots regard them negatively as sources of illegitimacy.

### **Professionalism**

Increasing donor income has correspondingly increased the organisation's professionalism. To deliver donor-funded projects, the organisation has recruited staff who are educated and qualified in administrative responsibilities, such as report writing, undertaking financial auditing procedures and monitoring budgets. Their professional reliability appeals to donors who generally select more established and capacitated CSOs to fund, in the belief that they are more likely to have the institutional capability to deliver projects on a certain scale, as a donor representative explained:





Given the size of the funds that are disbursed, we need an organisation that has the systems in place to be able to cope. We have mechanisms to check the health of the institutions, so we want the policies in place, the board of directors, the regulations that ensure they are working within the national law that governs NGOs, and we also need the audited work of three years. Without those regulations, it would be difficult to trust that the funds would be well spent.

In East Africa, persons with disabilities are a marginalised group with lower levels of education, and the CSO has found it difficult to source persons with disabilities with the adequate skills to deliver donor-funded projects. At the time of the research, the number of persons with disabilities employed at the organisation was less than a third. A member of the management team explained why:

We do try to hire persons with disabilities, but we are not always able to get the skillsets that we want. And in the end, we have a constant demand for deliverables to our donors: we have reports to write, we have targets to think about. So it's tough. We don't want to have to close [persons with disabilities] out but this is the situation.

The lack of persons with disabilities working at the CSO is a key cause of its weakened legitimacy among the grassroots, who often expect their representation within bodies that lobby on their behalf and feel that the organisation has a responsibility to hire staff with disabilities as an example to others. Additionally, the few staff with disabilities report feeling like they are a burden; when they request provisions to enable them to work comfortably, such as back supports on chairs or alternative means of transportation to project sites, their requests are denied by the management who feel under pressure to deliver within the budgets and timescales set by donors. Some persons with disabilities who know the staff are aware of this and are angered by it, because it suggests to them that the CSO fosters an environment that is not itself inclusive to its employees with disabilities.

As the inflow of donor aid increased, it also brought opportunities for the management to receive higher salaries, make overseas trips, and enjoy privileges that are out of reach for many in the grassroots disability community, who often experience life beneath the poverty line. Many of the grassroots regard the CSO as an elite-run professionalised organisation that is alienated and out of touch with the needs and concerns of the disability community, and is thus poorly suited to represent their interests.

## Agenda

Donors' assessments of advocacy priorities arise from their own national and political interests, and the programmes they support tend to fall within these agendas. According to an employee of a bilateral donor, "our strategic areas are reassessed every 5 years and these are spelled out in the new policy framework and then it's the job of the in-country teams to select proposals that work towards these goals". Since the launch of the Sustainable Development Goals, which recognises the



intersectional nature of disability, donor attention towards disability issues has been growing (Keogh 2017). The CSO's management are alive to this trend and have become astute in identifying funding prospects for broader causes, such as education, electoral transparency and gender equality, with the aim of mainstreaming advocacy for disability inclusion within these programmes.

The CSO's flexibility to adapt project proposals to fit with shifting donor trends legitimises the organisation to the donors, which only fund projects in line with their specific agendas, but are willing to implement more disability-inclusive development programming. This has widened the field of funding opportunities for the CSO, and means they can bring their expertise on disability inclusion to projects that are not specifically related to disability.

However, following the top-down agendas set by donors has drawn the organisation away from its role in representing the concerns of the grassroots, which has weakened its legitimacy among some of the DPOs. A senior staff member of the CSO explained the challenges they encounter when donors fund them to implement policy advocacy on predetermined topics:

What happens is, I am here doing a lot of work around advocacy and around laws, but our people on the ground cannot eat these policies and laws. They want the immediate, the food, the school fees, the wheelchairs. So they hear us doing a lot of meetings, but not solving their immediate problems! So we are in trouble! I can't deny, there are people who hate us for that, they are very critical of our work. But It is not our fault. We are not supported to do that.

In most of the supported projects, the strategy, scope and location of the projects is pre-established by donors. Many of the DPO members who had taken part in these projects emphasised their positive impact. However when asked, it was evident that the goals of the projects did not necessarily coincide with their primary ambitions which generally centred around investment in their business activities like poultry farming or dress-making to generate sustainable incomes. Some DPO members who have never taken part in a project feel disenfranchised because they believe there is no space for bottom-up input in consulting the organisation about what issues to lobby for. A person with a disability said, "We have paid our membership fees for so long but not once have they talked with us about where we want to see progress, so what they are fighting for I have no idea".

## Strategy

Several decades ago, the CSO became known among the grassroots for leading the disability community in protests against the government which occasionally turned violent and led to persons with disabilities being killed by the authorities. Over time, however, the organisation has changed its tactic towards non-confrontational advocacy and working with the government. According to a senior staff member, "The way we used to do it is not appropriate for where we want to get to. In my experience, if you shout at those in power, they will ignore you. If we



become confrontational as a sector, we lose out. So we are very careful that we tell the truth, but in a diplomatic way. Then we are able to influence but from the inside”.

The CSO’s non-confrontational advocacy strategy legitimises the CSO to most of the donors, particularly the bilateral donors who are often reluctant to support more radical strategies as they are unwilling to jeopardise their diplomatic and economic relations with governments in the global South. “It is not in our remit to fund protests and the like, we want to see coherent strategies”, explained a contact person from a bilateral donor. While some donors fund the CSO to lobby the national government directly, other donors fund the CSO to build the capacity of grassroots DPOs to lobby regional governments themselves, however both advocacy routes employ non-confrontational strategies.

The organisation has a close working relationship with the national government and the management is well connected on a personal level with numerous power holders within various ministries. Having the ear of those in power is a further source of legitimacy for the donors who fund projects around influencing policymaking, because they see the organisation as ideally positioned to do so. “One thing we like about them [the CSO] is their connections in government. They never need our help in that regard, they are even better connected with the ministries than we are!”, said an employee of a multilateral donor. The CSO’s relationship with government has developed over the years due to the organisation’s historical reputation as a key player in the formation of disability laws. The government, keen to show the public they are sympathetic towards disability rights, regularly approach the CSO for consultation advice on disability matters and invite the CSO to international events to speak on behalf of persons with disabilities.

While non-confrontational advocacy strategies bestow the organisation with legitimacy in the eyes of the donors, this approach has undermined its legitimacy to many persons with disabilities, who often demand more confrontational tactics. Although some interviewees agreed that the non-confrontational route is the more sensible one, the generally shared view among the grassroots is that radical and outspoken voices are needed. During the fieldwork period, the disability community were angered by news that a well-known hotel had refused to host a group of persons with disabilities. A disability activist commented about the CSO: “[They] are supposed to speak for us but they did not do a thing, they did not say a thing. They should have arranged a demonstration or something, anything!”.

Furthermore, the organisation’s close working relationship with power holders in government leads to a belief amongst many of the grassroots that it is a “puppet” of the government, which has undermined its legitimacy within the disability community. It is widely felt that the government fall short of fulfilling their duty to uphold disability rights, and in their view, the closeness of the CSO to the government compromises its ability to be an effective watchdog. A DPO member commented: “They said we cannot interfere with what the government does. They are inside the regime now”. Many in the grassroots believe that the CSO must be prepared to openly hold the government to account if it is to legitimately represent their needs.



## Track Record

The CSO has been instrumental historically in the formation of national disability legislation, and this track record brings the organisation legitimacy to donors. According to one donor NGO employee, "A lot of the disability policies you see now in the country, well [the CSO] were behind most of those". Moreover, the CSO has achieved quantifiable targets and outputs in prior donor-funded projects, which allows them to demonstrate an appearance of success to potential new donors. As one philanthropic donor employee said, "When we were at the proposal stage, we spoke to some of their previous donors and looked at past project reports, and we saw that, 'Yes, okay, they have the experience and the know-how', so that shows to us that they can deliver results". Furthermore, simply on account of having received donor funding in the past is itself a source of legitimacy to prospective donors. The fact that donors are typically well-connected allowed the organisation to meet new donors through their existing donor relationships. In this way, the organisation's legitimacy to donors is almost self-replicating.

The CSO's involvement in top-level policy-making is viewed with mixed admiration by the grassroots. Some participants were more conscious of the organisation's historical role, however most were unimpressed or even unaware of the CSO's track record, because the disability laws that the organisation has pioneered have not always been subject to effective implementation by the state. The grassroots judge the CSO more on its role in implementing DPO capacity-building projects at present in the communities, which in their view is marred by favouritism and partisanship. Some people felt that the organisation's ability to attract funding puts them in position where they play a gatekeeping role over who can be involved in the organisation's activities and who cannot. According to them, the management rewards a close circle of loyal DPOs with special treatment and invitations to events while critical and outspoken DPOs are side-lined. Said one DPO member, "They only implement projects in regions where they have friendships with people. They actually keep going back to the same places and funding the same DPOs over and over again".

Such perceived gatekeeping leads to accusations that the management tries to control which DPOs can and cannot be part of the national disability movement instead of building a broad coalition. A former staff member concurred with this view, claiming that the CSO "has so many amazing opportunities that are just not shared with other [persons with disabilities]". Some DPOs from minority ethnic groups believe the management has a preference towards DPOs from certain tribes over others, and such apparent partisanship is a source of illegitimacy to many disability activists, particularly in a context where tribalism is deeply rooted in society. Therefore, the CSO's influential history is not what stands out to the grassroots, but rather, their beliefs about how the CSO conducts its present work.

## Membership

Publicly the organisation state that they have nearly 200 member DPOs. To be a member, DPOs must be officially registered and have a constitution and a formal process where the office bearers are elected by members. All DPOs are required



to pay a one-off membership registration fee to the CSO of USD 15, and an annual subscription fee of either USD 15 for small sub-national DPOs or USD 45 for national DPOs.

The CSO's membership implies close links to the grassroots, and this appeals to the donors who fund projects implemented at the local level. As one bilateral donor employee remarked:

One of the main reasons we chose to partner with [the CSO] is because they are membership-based, so they have a wide network of small organisations, and for us this is actually something we look for quite closely because we want to make sure that resources get to these sub-national groups, because that is where the change is normally coming from. But we know we don't have those connections at the grassroots level, so the way we work there is through the local organisations that we fund.

The member DPOs believe that even though the CSO is nominally a membership-based organisation, it actually operates in a way that is distant from them. In the organisation's early days, the staff used to travel around the country sensitising DPOs on their disability rights and recruiting DPOs to become members. However, as its donor funding has increased, its availability for its members has decreased, because the staff's time is spent on donor-funded projects and donors only fund project-related costs. So although donor income brings an upward cycle of attracting more donors, it also brings a downward spiral in membership size because it makes it more difficult to attract new members. Nowadays, the organisation does not perform the same level of outreach and recruitment that it used to. "We are not very vibrant in encouraging DPOs to join", admitted a staff member.

Contrary to its public statement of having 200 members, only 18 DPOs either registered or renewed their membership subscription in 2017, the lowest number since the organisation was founded. As a staff member explained, the core funding the organisation receives from DPO membership fees is "negligible", meaning the staff are driven to spend much of their time writing proposals to secure more donor funding, leaving them little time or resources available to update members. One interviewee whose DPO is a member of the CSO said that they rarely receive updates on the organisation's activities: "We pay our membership fees, but they don't report to us, they've never called us to any meeting, they never come to see us, we never hear from them."

As the CSO's donor funding has increased, its reliance on membership fees has decreased, and some of the grassroots believe the management no longer feels the need to be accountable towards the members. A staff member who has since left described a hostile environment for persons with disabilities entering the office, claiming that if they ask to meet with the CEO, "He says he cannot see them, or maybe 1 day they might be able to call him". There is a general feeling among many of the grassroots that the management displays ambivalence and even disdain towards its members, diminishing the organisation's legitimacy in the eyes of the grassroots.



## Governance

One of the founders of the CSO is a well-known pioneer of the disability movement who has received accolades both nationally and overseas in recognition for his work. Despite being advanced in age, he continues to be actively involved in many advocacy bodies that promote the rights of persons with disabilities worldwide. His high-profile name remains historically associated with the organisation, and this brings status and legitimacy to the donors. A staff member from a donor organisation stated that "Anyone who knows disability in [the country] knows of this man. I knew of his work even before we started working with [the CSO] so it was an honour when I came to meet him".

Although this individual no longer has any formal role within the organisation, it is suspected among some of the grassroots activists that he still retains power over the CSOs' activities from behind the scenes, and the perceived unwillingness of this individual to recede the governance position after 30 years causes them to lose faith in the organisation's integrity. One grassroots disability activist claims, "[The CSO] is suffering from what we call founder's syndrome: the last chairperson seems to be chairman for life. And this is so common in the disability movement here: same old faces, same rigid structures. I can't blame the younger people for not stepping up because they have to tow structural lines".

The CSO is overseen by a board of nine members. Every 3 years, each member DPO can nominate two representatives as board members, and a vote is subsequently held for the member DPOs to elect the board. All board members are chairpersons of DPOs with various different disabilities and are closely connected with the grassroots in the different parts of the country. According to one employee of a philanthropic donor agency, the presence of the DPO-elected board legitimises the CSO because it "shows us that there are mechanisms in place for transparency and accountability to the members".

However, many in the grassroots do not feel represented by the board which they feel is not functioning in practice as appearing on paper. In fact, many interviewees, representing a range of disability associations, expressed anger and resentment towards the board members who they felt was not doing its job of holding the CSO accountable. Numerous stories were shared of how board members consistently refrain from asking critical questions to the CSOs's leadership regarding its strategic focus, its orientation towards donors and its alienation from the grassroots.

## Why is Grassroots Illegitimacy not a Problem for Donors?

The previous section showed that donors and the grassroots have vastly diverging and even contrasting views of CSO legitimacy and identified six sources of (il)legitimacy. Three of these sources, specifically its professionalism, agenda and strategy, reveal a paradox, because the very qualities which bestow the CSO with legitimacy to the donors, are the same things that delegitimise the organisation in the eyes of the grassroots. As donors provide incentives to the CSO to become legitimate in their eyes, they unintentionally undermine its grassroots legitimacy. Regarding the



three remaining (ii) legitimacy sources (track record, membership base and governance) we see again that donors and the grassroots again have very different perceptions. In these areas, however, the reasons for the CSO's grassroots delegitimisation cannot be laid with the donors.

Overall, donor pressures combined with the management's troubling actions have ultimately led the CSO to face a crisis of legitimacy among the grassroots. Yet grassroots legitimacy is considered to be the basis of CSO legitimacy, and indeed, several donors claim that proximity to the grassroots is their driving motivation for supporting the CSO. This raises the question as to why the lack of grassroots support is apparently not a problem for donors. This section identifies three mechanisms that explain why the CSO, despite lacking grassroots legitimacy, maintains and even increases its legitimacy to donors. Three reasons surface: (1) donor priorities and capacities; (2) the monopoly position of the CSO; and (3) perception management by the CSO.

### **Donor Priorities and Capacities**

This study revealed that, at the end of the day, grassroots legitimacy is ultimately not a key priority for most donors. While the donors in this study all mentioned the importance of grassroots legitimacy, most of them they did not consult with the grassroots or research grassroots legitimacy otherwise, when deciding to fund the CSO in question. Donors considered membership and governance to be relevant legitimacy sources; both of which could easily point to grassroots legitimacy concerns. However, assessment of these legitimacy sources by donors is a mere box-ticking exercise: provided the CSO demonstrates the appearance of meeting these criteria, the donors are satisfied and do not investigate any further. This means the allegations of the management's behaviour that point towards gatekeeping, corruption and favouritism are unnoticed by most donors.

Representatives from two of the donors who participated in the research suggested they were aware of some of the allegations surrounding the CSO: one was a national donor as opposed to a foreign donor, and the other was a disability-rights NGO that is cognisant of the country's grassroots disability scene. The latter donor had in fact resolved not to fund the CSO in any future projects, because of the rumours and because they had directly encountered negative experiences working with the CSO. Besides these two, however, the remaining six donors seemed oblivious to the CSO's unpopularity among the grassroots.

In general, the research found that most donors are poorly equipped to detect grassroots legitimacy concerns. Multilateral and bilateral donors in particular appeared sparsely staffed relative to the amount of funding that is disbursed and simply do not have the capacity to pay rigorous attention to organisational practices. Furthermore, most donors have a broad thematic focus and such lack strong connections with the local disability scene. Finally, as is characteristic of donors, all those participating in the study are based in the capital city which exacerbates the sense of distance between sources and recipients of funding.



## Monopoly

The organisation is uniquely positioned as the only nationwide advocacy CSO that represents all DPOs in the country; other groups focus only on one type of disability, one age group, or operate only in certain parts of the country. Their wide-reaching mandate appeals to many of the donors who want to implement advocacy programmes that advance rights for all types of disabilities at the national level. As one donor employee explained, "We prefer organisations like [the CSO] because we want to support all disabilities, not just the visually impaired or physically impaired or any other particular group: we prefer to have a broader and more inclusive focus around disability issues in general".

The study illustrates that civil society aid is also susceptible to market forces of supply and demand. The scarcity of alternative CSOs with a similar mandate essentially gives the organisation a monopoly on performing advocacy for all people with all types of disabilities from across the country, which puts them in a position of power. As Ebrahim (2003) argues, donors and CSOs are "highly interdependent"; not only are CSOs dependent on donors for "economic capital", but donors also depend on CSOs to deliver work that will bestow them with "symbolic capital" (p. 101). CSOs, by claiming to represent all persons with disability in the country, enable donors to claim fulfillment of their mandate. In that sense, the grassroots are commodified and enable CSOs to sell 'good projects' to donors. In this logic, the allocation of resources and the development of activities can be shaped independently from what recipients may want or need (Krause 2014).

## Perception Management

The donors' main contact persons in the CSO are the individuals at the management level, as opposed to the lower level staff, and in this sense, the management act as the gatekeepers of information. Over the years, they have become astute in what donors require from the CSO and what they regard as important. The management make strategic decisions in how they present the CSO to donors by emphasising the elements of the organisation that donors are likely to regard favourably while actively concealing aspects that might tarnish donors' perceptions of the organisation. In doing so they are able to influence donors' perceptions of the organisation in order to maintain legitimacy in their eyes (see also Jones 2017; Elbers and Arts 2011).

For instance, the number of actively subscribing DPOs at the time of writing was 18 but the management publicly declares that the CSO has nearly 200 members. The management do not disclose to donors the grassroots' discontent, and ensure that they introduce donors to friendly board members and DPO representatives who duly provide positive feedback on the organisation. While the grassroots claim that the management is belittling, donors see a side of the staff that is friendly and attentive. As a junior staff member said about the management, "They have two faces. They show one side to the donors and a completely different side to the DPOs and staff".





Crucially, perception management towards the donors is possible because the spheres in which donors operate are usually disconnected from the grassroots (see above). In order to learn about DPOs' concerns, for instance, donors are reliant on the management as their main source of information. The management are aware of this, and take advantage of this knowledge gap by controlling what reaches the donors and what does not.

## Conclusions and Discussion

This article started by examining the various sources of the CSO's legitimacy and how these are interpreted by the donors and the grassroots. It showed that donors and the grassroots interpret CSO legitimacy very differently. On the one hand, the donors perceive the CSO to be professional, reliable, and closely tied to the grassroots, explaining why its support has increased to unprecedented levels. On the other hand, the grassroots regard the CSO as elitist, out of touch with their concerns, and more interested in protecting its own position than movement building, and thus its support has plummeted.

The study clearly shows a distinction between the illegitimacy that arises from the CSO's struggles to manage competing stakeholder requirements and the illegitimacy for which the CSO alone bears responsibility and for which the donors cannot be blamed. With regards to the former, the study shows that donor demands have driven the organisation away from its mandate to represent the needs of the grassroots, which has ultimately discredited the CSO among those it claims to represent. These findings concur with arguments that donor funding can delegitimise CSOs to the target groups they purport to represent (Edwards and Hulme 1995; Prakash and Gugerty 2010; Walton et al. 2016).

The study also identified three reasons why, even though grassroots legitimacy is considered essential for CSOs, organisations with weak grassroots legitimacy can continue to attract donor funding. First, and although deemed important on paper, donor priorities and capacities are such that grassroots concerns largely remain unnoticed. Second, the CSO has a monopoly position in being the only nationwide organisation that claims to represent all disability types. Third, the management strategically attempts to inform the donors only about aspects of the organisation they are likely to look upon favourably.

The latter shows that donors are for a large part dependent on CSOs for their perception of the legitimacy of those same CSOs. Moreover, these CSOs also play a crucial role in the ability of donors to get acquainted with the legitimacy views of the grassroots. The CSO is the gatekeeper as the donor has no direct relations, or contact, with the grassroots. In fact, this lack of direct contact is an important reason for donors to work with CSOs in the first place and at the same time prevents donors from learning the grassroots views on the legitimacy of the CSO. As in the CSO example here, not knowing the legitimacy views of the grassroots could mean ending up funding an organisation not being considered legitimate by those grassroots. In turn this could then easily lead to a further alienation between donors and



grassroots—the exact opposite of what the donor wants to achieve by funding the CSO. In the words of Joseph Heller, donors are stuck in a “Catch-22”.

The above suggests that donors have a universal approach to legitimacy; they thus have difficulties in thinking outside their own legitimacy box and of acknowledging that others may have completely different and even opposing views on the legitimacy of CSOs. Put differently: donors have problems in recognising, or acting upon, the social constructive nature of CSO legitimacy.

To bridge the chasm that exists between donors and grassroots, different authors have called for the importance of creating spaces for meaningful dialogue, including face-to-face dialogue and involving beneficiaries in the planning and performance assessments of CSOs (Mawdsley et al. 2005; Kaldor 2003; Zyl and Claeÿ 2019). Other authors including Andrews (2014) and Brown and Jagadananda (2007) call for expanding mutually accountable schemes in which the formats for information sharing and the expectations from different stakeholders are clearly laid out in advance. Based on the great difficulties of donors to think outside their own legitimacy criteria, however, one may wonder whether such suggestions will ever move beyond wishful thinking.

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**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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