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Abstract

The foundations of non-profit legitimacy are being reshaped by profound technological, political, and cultural transformations. This article examines three interrelated shifts that will define the future of NGO legitimacy: digital engagement, populist backlash, and decolonial critiques. The digital era has made online visibility a key determinant of legitimacy, with social media platforms mediating perceptions and amplifying both trust and scandal. Populist and nationalist movements increasingly delegitimise NGOs by framing them as "foreign agents," undermining their representational and moral authority. At the same time, decolonial critiques challenge donor-driven legitimacy standards, advocating for community-based frameworks rooted in cultural embeddedness, relational accountability, and local leadership. Initiatives promoting localisation in humanitarian aid illustrate how legitimacy is gradually shifting toward grassroots authority and away from external validation. Together, these dynamics suggest that legitimacy will no longer be sustained through donor recognition or formal compliance alone. Instead, NGOs must cultivate credibility across digital, political, and cultural arenas, balancing digital adaptability with authenticity, resisting political delegitimation, and anchoring legitimacy in local contexts. For scholars, these developments highlight the urgency of rethinking legitimacy as a contested and evolving construct. For practitioners, they offer a roadmap for sustaining trust through inclusive, adaptive, and community-rooted strategies.

Keywords

non-profit legitimacy; digital trust; populism; decolonial critiques; localisation; community accountability

1. Introduction

Legitimacy is the foundation upon which non-profits mobilise resources, build trust, and influence policy. Yet the conditions under which legitimacy is constructed are undergoing rapid change. Technological shifts, populist backlash, and decolonial critiques are redefining how NGOs sustain credibility and authority. This article explores these emerging dynamics,

highlighting how the digital sphere, nationalist politics, and community-based legitimacy frameworks are transforming the future of non-profit legitimacy.

2. Digital Legitimacy in the Social Media Era

The digital era has reconfigured legitimacy by shifting public trust onto online platforms. Social media ecosystems mediate perceptions of NGOs, where narratives—supportive or critical—spread rapidly through viral content (Milan, 2015). Research shows that visibility on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and TikTok shapes not only public opinion but also donor recognition and policy access (Hofmann et al., 2021). Algorithmic dynamics amplify this trend, rewarding NGOs that adapt to platform logics while marginalising those unable to navigate digital engagement effectively. Digital legitimacy has thus become a central mechanism for credibility, but it is volatile, vulnerable to sudden reputational crises.

3. Populist and Nationalist Backlash

Legitimacy is also contested in political arenas. Populist and nationalist movements increasingly portray NGOs as "foreign agents" or threats to sovereignty. Such narratives erode moral and representational legitimacy by positioning NGOs as disconnected from national identity and local values (Carothers & Brechenmacher, 2014). Examples from Hungary, India, and Russia illustrate how restrictive legislation and hostile rhetoric curtail NGO operations and reduce public trust (Dupuy, Ron, & Prakash, 2015). This trend underscores that legitimacy is not only socially constructed but also politically contested, shaped by deliberate efforts to undermine civil society.

4. Decolonial Critiques and Community-Based Legitimacy

Decolonial perspectives challenge Western-centric definitions of legitimacy that privilege donor accountability and efficiency metrics. Scholars argue that equating legitimacy with compliance to external standards marginalises culturally embedded and community-defined forms of validation (Moyo, 2020). Locally rooted legitimacy emphasises relational accountability, historical ties, and cultural resonance (Choudry, 2015). In this view, authority lies not with international donors but with the communities that NGOs serve. This shift is both normative—anchoring legitimacy in justice and equity—and pragmatic, as donor-driven models face growing resistance from grassroots constituencies.

5. Localisation and Emerging Practice

The rise of "localisation" in humanitarian and development practice reflects this transformation. Locally led organisations are well-positioned to generate legitimacy by

drawing on cultural knowledge, community trust, and historical embeddedness. Agendas prioritising local leadership highlight moral and representational legitimacy as benchmarks of credibility (Barbelet, 2018). Donors and international agencies are gradually adapting funding mechanisms to recognise these locally defined legitimacy frameworks (Roepstorff, 2020). This evolution signals a paradigm shift in which sustainability will depend less on external recognition and more on embedding legitimacy in community contexts.

6. Discussion

Taken together, digital transformations, populist backlash, and decolonial critiques illustrate that legitimacy is becoming increasingly fragmented and contested. Online platforms amplify both opportunities and vulnerabilities; nationalist governments strategically delegitimise NGOs; and decolonial frameworks call for locally grounded definitions of authority. For scholars, these dynamics demand new theoretical models that account for legitimacy as fluid, multi-sited, and politically contested. For practitioners, they point to the need for adaptive strategies that integrate digital communication, political resilience, and participatory, community-led approaches.

7. Conclusion

The future of non-profit legitimacy will be shaped by forces that extend beyond traditional donor–NGO relations. Digital visibility, political contestation, and locally defined frameworks will determine whether NGOs are seen as credible and trustworthy. Sustaining legitimacy requires organisations to adopt adaptive digital strategies, respond to nationalist delegitimation with authenticity and resilience, and anchor authority in community relationships rather than external validation. For academics, these developments highlight legitimacy as a contested, dynamic concept requiring continuous re-theorisation. For practitioners, they underscore that the sustainability of NGOs depends on embedding legitimacy in inclusive, participatory, and culturally resonant practices.

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