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**Author(s):** Kontinen, Tiina; Bananuka, Twine Hannington

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# NGO Legitimacy as a Continuous Negotiation Process: Fostering ‘Good Citizenship’ in Western Uganda

*Tiina Kontinen*
*Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland*
*tiina.t.kontinen@jyu.fi*

*Twine Hannington Bananuka*
*Faculty of Education, University of Oulu, Finland*
*Department of Adult and Community Education, Makerere University, Uganda*
*Twine.Bananuka@mak.ac.ug*

## Abstract

The article draws on and contributes to debates on the legitimacy of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engaged in development, defining organizational legitimacy as a social construct that is continually negotiated in relationships with diverse audiences. To explore the negotiated nature of NGO legitimacy, the article examines the efforts of a Ugandan NGO, Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC), to foster citizens’ capacities in rural communities in the western part of the country. Drawing on interviews and participant observation, we scrutinize the ways in which KRC balances between different and even contrasting legitimacy expectations stemming from three types of encounters significant to the NGO: those with international collaborators, community members, and local government. We show how international collaborators prioritize support for active citizenship, manifested in mobilizing to claim rights and accountability; village residents emphasize good citizenship, comprising a secure livelihood and community contributions; and local government endorses citizenship characterized by fulfilling obligations. The NGO must balance between those expectations to secure funding, fulfil their empowerment mission, and maintain their ability to act without restrictions. In conclusion, the article argues for a notion of NGO legitimacy as a state of continual negotiation, wherein the specificities of significant audiences and the nature of the negotiations vary, based on the activities and contexts of any particular development NGO.

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## About the authors

*Tiina Kontinen* is an Associate Professor in International Development Studies at the University of Jyväskylä (Finland), where she leads a research group on Citizenship and Civil Society in Development. She has published on civil society, NGOs, and North-South partnership, and has led various projects with global research teams.

*Twine Hannington Bananuka* is a lecturer at Makerere University (Uganda). At the time of writing the article he worked as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oulu (Finland). His teaching and research interests include participatory and visual research methods, adult learning, community education, and citizenship education.

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## Introduction

Since the early 1990s, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played an important role in development policies and practices, something demonstrated by their increased number in many countries in the Global South (Banks and Bukenya 2022; Hearn 2007; Kajimbwa 2006). The contributions made by NGOs, especially to empowerment at the local level, have been acknowledged, but this has been accompanied by ongoing debate about their legitimacy. In development studies, the discussion has largely revolved around whether the professionalization of development NGOs and their growing distance from grassroots levels weakens their legitimacy in terms of representing or understanding the concerns of the people for whom they claim to speak (Banks et al. 2015). A wealth of scholarship has also focused on the NGOs' need to strike a balance between the simultaneous but different legitimacy expectations of their international donors and the communities with whom they work (Lister 2003; Claeyé 2014; Elbers et al. 2021; Matelski et al. 2021). This has predominantly addressed the overall hegemony of managerialism in accountability relationships between NGOs from the Global South and North on the one hand (Burchardt 2013; Girei 2014; 2022), and the impositions of agendas and circulation of diverse development buzzwords on the other (Tvedt 2006; Mawdsley et al. 2005).

This article contributes to the debates on NGO legitimacy by suggesting an understanding of legitimacy as a continuous process of negotiation, illustrating this argument with the empirical case of a Ugandan NGO engaged in numerous programmes, including some concerned with civic education. In this context, legitimacy is not understood as a technical issue related to how well NGOs represent their claimed constituencies or reach their performance indicators, but as a dynamic social construct (Lister 2003). We draw on a particular definition of organizational legitimacy as a perceived appropriateness (Suchman 1995) that is negotiated and renegotiated within diverse relationships (Egholm et al. 2020) with legitimizing audiences (Lister 2003). Overall, in resonance with scholarship producing ethnographies of aid (Mosse 2005) and an actor-oriented approach to development (Long 2001), our starting point is that, regardless of formal strategies, plans, and project blueprints, development programmes are always realized through encounters with actors with diverse perspectives, interests, and values. In these encounters, the goals and activities of interventions, as well as the legitimacy of the implementing organization, are continuously negotiated.

One arena of contestation over NGO legitimacy concerns their role as service deliverers stepping in for inadequate state delivery (Muhumuza 2005), versus their role as promoters of societal transformation (Mitlin et al. 2007), especially in regard to their contribution to good governance and the realization of human rights (Englund 2006). Many NGO projects and programmes promote citizens' engagement (Gaventa and Barret 2012) and forms of social accountability that seek to raise awareness of existing rights and encourage people to demand their realization (Hickey and King 2016). The literature also presents discussions of why people have not become active despite such efforts, thereby providing perspectives onto civic habitus (Pettit 2020) or habits of citizenship (Holma and Kontinen 2020). Issues such as a tendency to align with the authorities (Dorman 2014) and barriers imposed by (semi)authoritarian states (Alava 2020; Rutzen 2015) have likewise been pointed out. Additionally, the balance between promoting civic engagement and strengthening economic capabilities (King 2015), and the relevance of the universalistic human rights discourse for the African poor (Englund 2006) have been discussed. Moreover, it has been argued that the more NGOs have started to engage with issues such as good governance and human rights, the more their activities have been restricted and harassed by governments in the process of shrinking or squeezing civic space (Buyse 2018). Therefore, our general starting point is that while the citizenship-strengthening programmes of Southern NGOs might increase their legitimacy in the eyes of international development actors favouring civic engagement, such programmes can simultaneously, at least temporarily, hamper their legitimacy in the evaluations of rural communities struggling with their everyday livelihoods and, in the most extreme cases, totally delegitimize them in the eyes of the government.

In this article, we explore the multiple legitimacy negotiations of a Ugandan NGO, Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC), focusing on its initiatives to strengthen citizenship and empower community members. Since its establishment, KRC has pursued an agenda that grounds civic knowledge in economic empowerment (KRC 2019). According to its organizational philosophy, impoverished people cannot demand their rights or hold leaders accountable until their material survival is secured. Based on an analysis of interviews and documents, supported by participant observation by the second author of this article, Twine Bananuka, in the NGO and the communities where it operates, we identify three main encounters where its legitimacy is negotiated: with international collaborators, with community members, and with the local government. We first identify the general characteristics of the "relationship in process" (Egholm et al. 2020) between the NGO and each of the three "legitimizing audience[s]" (Lister 2003), and second, the perceptions of good and appropriate, hence legitimate, citizenship, and the means for strengthening it, that are discussed in these negotiations.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we elaborate on our conceptual lens: legitimacy as a continuous process of negotiation, with a focus on debates concerning interventions addressing citizenship. Second, we describe the case-study organization, KRC, and the research methods used. Then we proceed to our findings concerning KRC's encounters with international collaborators, community members, and local government. We show how development partners prioritize supporting active citizenship manifested in claiming rights, communities emphasize good citizenship comprising a secure livelihood and community contribution, while local government pays attention to citizenship characterized by fulfilling obligations. Finally, we conclude with the argument that NGO legitimacy is a process of continuous negotiation rather than a status that can be achieved. We suggest that identifying the significant legitimizing audiences and characteristics of negotiations in each case and context is essential to understanding the dynamics of NGOs in Uganda and elsewhere.

## NGO legitimacy in fostering citizenship

Since the 1990s, when international development funding was strongly geared towards NGOs, their role has become more significant and visible, and their number has multiplied in many countries in Africa (Banks and Bukenya 2022; Jennings 2013). In Uganda the rising prevalence of NGOs in the 1990s was attributed to various factors, including political stability (Muhumuza 2005) and the failure of the state to provide needed social services (Makoba 2002). With the emphasis on good governance and human rights agendas in international development, more African NGOs started to challenge the states where they operated (Jennings 2013, 322). Consequently, their legislative and bureaucratic environments became more constrained, and governments took greater control over their registration and conducted stricter monitoring of their activities (Dupuy et al. 2021). In Uganda, this has happened despite the recognition of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and NGOs as government partners in laws and statutes such as the 1995 Constitution of Uganda and the

2016 NGO Act (Nassali 2014).

In development studies, debates on the legitimacy of development NGOs not only tackles their legal status but also the perceived ability of organizations to contribute to development or the common good in the fields and regions of their activities (Ibrahim 2017). A significant strand of research discusses the legitimacy of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), and the challenges of fulfilling simultaneous legitimacy expectations on the part of the funders and publics in the Global North and the partners and beneficiaries in the Global South (Mitchell et al. 2020; Ossewaarde et al. 2008; Walton et al. 2016). The legitimacy of NGOs in terms of whether they really represent the constituencies they claim to represent – such as persons with disabilities, rural communities, or women – and the values to which they allegedly adhere, has been a subject of central debates concerning both international and local NGOs (Atack 1999; Banks et al. 2015; Mitchell et al. 2020, 100). Some studies have focused primarily on the legitimacy of NGOs in the Global South, showing how NGOs must balance between achieving legitimacy in the eyes of their international donors and the people in the communities with whom they are working (Elbers et al. 2021; Matelski et al. 2021). This literature has argued that aligning with donors' legitimacy demands and their expectations of qualities such as 'professionalism' can simultaneously decrease NGO legitimacy in the eyes of the communities where they operate (Elbers et al. 2021; Banks et al. 2015). Here, professionalism often refers to forms of managerialism and mechanisms of accountability, the appropriateness of which are perceived differently by donors and local communities (Burchardt 2013; Dar 2014; Claeyé 2014).

Theoretically, discussion of NGO legitimacy in development research has drawn from a number of different fields including the political theory point of view, which encompasses justification for action. Thrandardottir (2015) and Walton et al. (2016) utilize Jeremey Beetham's (1991) theory of legitimacy as evaluated vis-á-vis normative frameworks, and Atack (1999) establishes a framework for formal procedural and substantive-purposive criteria for NGO legitimacy based on theories that originally address state legitimacy as secured by the authority and consent of citizens. Meanwhile, legitimacy criteria have revolved around performance and accountability in much of the development NGO literature (Edwards and Hulme 1995). In her influential article, Lister (2003), however, argues that representativeness, performance, and accountability are more technical issues, and suggests an alternative understanding of legitimacy as a social construct, referring back to Beetham's (1991) idea that legitimacy receives its meaning in relation to particular frameworks. Lister proposes an organization theory perspective on legitimacy and, incorporating the three pillars of institutions proposed by Scott's (1995) and Suchman's (1995) seminal work on organizational legitimacy, proposes regulatory, cognitive, normative, and pragmatic legitimacy, which are continuously evaluated by diverse "legitimizing audiences" through the lenses of their own approaches, interests, and perceptions (Lister 2003, 179).

Drawing on this strand of research from the organizational perspective, recent scholarship has emphasized that NGO legitimacy is not a status that can be achieved by fulfilling certain criteria but, rather, embedded in social relationships with diverse stakeholders (Mitchell et al. 2020). Similarly, building on the international relations literature, Dodworth (2014; 2022, 3-4) defines NGO legitimacy as the authority to act, and examines legitimation as a practice where such authority is constantly in the making via relational and contextual negotiated practice. Moreover, NGO legitimacy is seen as being dependent on context, time, and stakeholders, and, hence, characterized by a "balancing act" between diverse sources of legitimacy (Matelski et al. 2021). Indeed, recent analysis shows that sources of legitimacy valued by donors, such as professionalism, agenda, strategy, track record, and membership, can hamper legitimacy at the grassroots level (Elbers et al. 2021). In the Ugandan context, Kontinen and Ndidde (forthcoming) argue that legitimacy is not only negotiated vis-á-vis diverse actors but also in alignment with different institutional logics, such as patrimonialism, professionalism, community, and activism, all of which uphold diverse rationalities concerning appropriate action. Illustrating this, while using the notion of assemblages of ethics rather than legitimacy, Scherz (2014) discusses how an NGO balances between the ethics of charity, sustainable development, and interdependence prevalent in Ugandan communities.

Our contribution to the ongoing debates on organizational legitimacy of development NGOs draws on Egholm et al.'s (2020) addition to Suddaby et al.'s (2017) three legitimacy configurations: a product, a process, and a perception. Egholm et al. (2020, 14) propose to add a configuration of legitimacy as *relations in processes*, where the "common good is continuously renegotiated as a social, situated process", and where "macro and micro processes are interlinked and continuously constitute each other". In their view, it is impossible to assume that what happens in a micro-level event is determined by the macro-level, even if it what is understood by the macro-level seemingly has greater durability. For us, micro-level encounters between an NGO, community members, or government officials are simultaneously constituted by and constitute the ongoing relationships whereby legitimacy is constructed. In these negotiations diverse actors hold different ideas of an appropriate NGO, and what its appropriate actions and aspirations should be. In resonance with the well-established actor-oriented approach in development research (Long 2001), we suggest that each NGO intervention consists of a process of encounters with actors having different and even contradictory interests, values, and perspectives from which they enter into negotiations over the legitimacy of an organization and its initiatives. Hence, against this backdrop, we define the legitimacy of development NGOs as relations in a process characterized by continuous negotiations over the appropriateness of the organization and its activities in encounters with diverse actors connected with development interventions.

In this article, we focus on the legitimacy of development NGOs in fostering citizenship. Initiatives supporting citizens' engagement and active citizenship have gained more prevalence in recent decades, especially since the introduction of the good governance agenda and human-rights-based approaches in international development, (Gaventa and Barret 2012; Jennings 2013). In the 1990s, international development policies emphasized the role of civil society and active citizenship in the desired democratization process. Drawing on a De Tocquevillan idea of civil society as a sphere of associations, the debates on democratization were "Americanized" (Howell and Pearce 2002, 39) and accompanied by a strong belief that all associations can be regarded as "schools of citizenship" (Kymlicka and Norman 2000, 8) or democracy, where trust, equality, and plurality can flourish. However, Howell and Pearce (2002, 60) argue that such a possibility is a real challenge in contexts characterized by exploitation and poverty, and Encarnación (2000) claims than in the African historical context of organizing within new democracies, for instance, the assumption is a myth, even if extensively adopted by the development industry to promote good governance and advocacy.

Nevertheless, NGOs continue to foster citizenship through different means including civic education, forming local committees to conduct social accountability, and supporting moves by existing groups to engage more actively with government systems. While there are examples of NGO achievements in promoting citizens' activism, analysis has also indicated that civic habits (Pettit 2016) or habits of citizenship (Holma and Kontinen 2020) often change in a slow and gradual way, if at all. Moreover, it has been argued that the liberal notion of citizenship based on individual rights, and encouraging people to claim such rights, does not resonate with the experiences of citizenship in many postcolonial contexts (Robins et al. 2008), where history has positioned people merely as subjects and citizenship has been a status reserved for the elites (Mamdani 1996). For instance, Nabudere (2009, 259) suggests that the human-rights-based discourse should not be imposed from outside on the grassroots level but should rather arise from people's life experiences and their own nuanced conceptions of rights; in a similar vein, Englund (2006, 31) advocates the situational character of human rights and citizenship. In Uganda, Brisset-Foucault (2019, 4) argues that citizenship is an imaginary of political personhood, shaped by semi-authoritarianism, wherein the legitimacy of people's political participation and belonging are constantly negotiated. Dicklitch and Lwanga (2003), on the other hand, suggest that, in the context of neoliberalism and regime repressions, Ugandan citizenship is embedded in a general culture of "political apathy".

In conclusion, we contend that African development NGOs in general, including Ugandan organizations, which are connected with the international development field through funding and vocabularies (Schindler 2021, 44-48), continuously negotiate the legitimacy of their citizenship support programmes in different but simultaneous relationships. Therefore, in order to understand the dynamics of the "balancing acts" (Matelski et al. 2021) NGOs must undertake to continue functioning, investigation is required of the legitimacy negotiations taking place in specific historical, political, and cultural contexts. In what follows, we examine legitimacy negotiations and scrutinize understandings of 'good citizenship' from the point of view of one selected Ugandan NGO.

## Case-study NGO and research methodology

The study discussed in this article was carried out in collaboration with Kabarole Research and Resource Centre (KRC), which is registered as an indigenous NGO in mid-Western Uganda. KRC started in 1995 as a small consultancy firm and research agency which has since gradually grown into a large and professionalized development organization. In January 2022, it transformed into KRC Uganda in order to cover the entire country instead of focusing only on Western Uganda (Shariff 2022). As is typical of NGOs, the story of KRC is closely related to its founder, who later became the founding Executive Director, was at the helm of the organization for more than 15 years before he transited into national politics. He was described by co-founders, opinion leaders, and successive staff members as a "go getter and mobilizer". They cited the fact that, initially, he had convinced another young man and three young women to nurture KRC from scratch, turning it into the reputable organization that it is today. Later, he became a national leader by joining the Parliament of Uganda to represent Fort Portal Municipality.

Thus, KRC began as a firm established by a few young and unemployed university graduates who wanted to do something good for their society. As a consultancy agency, they collected data on people's livelihoods to be used to mobilize stakeholders such as the government, CSOs, cultural leaders, and churches to act on those findings (KRC 2017: Ruhunda 2009; 2017). When they realized that many stakeholders appreciated the findings but were unable to intervene, they decided to transform the firm into an NGO, which they registered in 1996. The organization received moral and financial support from a local priest and also a foreign businessman staying in the area who facilitated their contacts with potential international partners. In 2019 KRC created a board of trustees that supervises and appoints the board of directors and is a custodian of assets and liabilities.

In the interviews, long-term members narrated a similar story of the philosophy and changes in emphasis of the organization. It has supported the establishment of micro-finance associations in rural communities that offer interest-free loans and also provided direct grants, which, according to the interviewees, nurtured dependence rather than empowerment. It then started to support improvements in agriculture, first by supplying farming equipment, later by provision of knowledge and skills. Currently, KRC is engaged in what they call "change and transformation through knowledge and skills", the idea being that the organization performs a supportive role while letting people take charge of their own development concerns (Mwanga 2019). The approach is based on the view that people have resources but need to change their attitude to put what is available to better use, a change in attitude and mindset that has been promoted via media such as radio stations. According to KRC, right from the start its underlying philosophy has been one of "seeing an empowered citizen who is capable of taking charge and control of their own development and destiny" (KRC 2019). These changes resonate with similar developments – from handouts and grants to projects, followed by training and education – in other NGOs in Uganda and elsewhere, and thus exemplify organizational change in the intersection of learning and interaction with diverse actors, including local communities and international collaborators (Scherz 2014).

Today, KRC implements multiple programmes, largely funded by international 'development partners', that range from agriculture to civic education, the environment, human rights, peace education, refugee resettlement, and education. KRC has been running civic education programmes for over fifteen years, activities which intensified in 2018 when it received major funding from the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a national body supported by several development donors, to cover eight districts in mid-Western Uganda. The major focus of the programme is "achieving a civically competent citizenry with ability to demand for a more responsive and accountable state" (KRC 2018). The programme targets both leaders and local communities. Leaders are equipped with knowledge and skills at meetings and workshops to assist them with their duties and obligations, while several means of imparting information are used for the rural communities, including the radio, public rallies, and small meetings. In addition, the KRC has identified and trained specific persons such as Community Change agents (CCAs) and Civic Educators (CEs), who are based in communities, churches, and schools to inspire people into active civic life (KRC 2018; 2019; 2021).

We entered collaboration with KRC in 2018 in the framework of a larger research project on citizenship and learning in Uganda, designing and implementing the practical gathering of research material with the NGO. The specific material used in this article includes interviews with KRC staff (n=8), members of the board of trustees (n=3), and key local government officials (n=3) relevant to the two selected study communities. Using a participatory tool called 'ladder of citizenship' (Arnstein 1969; Hurlbert and Gupta 2015), we also conducted interviews with community members (n=35) in KRC programme areas to examine community ideas of what constitutes good citizenship and the aspirations connected with it, reported in more detail elsewhere (Bananuka, Kontinen and Holma 2022). While entry to the communities was facilitated by KRC, staff members were not present in community interviews. Nevertheless, knowing that the researchers were affiliated with the organization probably brought community members' responses into alignment with KRC programmes that were appreciated in the community. Interview material was supported by observations conducted by Bananuka, the second author of this article, who stayed with KRC and the communities for a period of three months, during which time he engaged in numerous informal interactions with community members; he then held three feedback meetings with the stakeholders based on the initial findings. The NGO interviews were conducted in English, the community interviews in the local language, Rutooro, spoken fluently by Bananuka. The interviews were transcribed first in the original language and then later translated into English.

Using thematic analysis, we scrutinized the characteristics of the NGO's diverse relationships as manifested in the interviews, documents, informal interactions, and in the feedback meetings, especially the negotiations revolving around the notion of 'good citizenship', guided by our broad definition of legitimacy as ongoing relationships with diverse legitimizing audiences.

## Findings: Legitimacy negotiation in encounters

In this section, we describe three broad categories of encounters where legitimacy is negotiated, frequently referred to by NGO staff as 'development partners', 'communities', and 'local government'. The development partners, or international collaborators, include international NGOs and other donor institutions that implement their programmes in collaboration with KRC, thus providing funding. The communities are the rural villages with which KRC has worked for a long time and where it currently implements its citizenship education programmes; we regard this encounter as being with community members, as not everyone in the villages participates in KRC programmes. Local government mostly refers to the leadership from village to district level. While we discuss these three legitimizing audiences (Lister 2003) separately, we acknowledge that in many cases they are intertwined and, more importantly, that they are internally heterogeneous audiences. International collaborators vary in their size, scope, and country of origin, and communities consist of inhabitants of different livelihood status, social position, and access to KRC activities. Therefore, a more nuanced analysis would have revealed more sophisticated legitimacy negotiations within the identified categories as well.

### Encounters with international collaborators

In this section, we discuss KRC's relationship with international collaborators – or 'development partners', the current 'legitimate' term also used by KRC – in general, and with regard to fostering citizenship in particular. As our brief account of the history of KRC indicates, it enjoys legitimacy in these relationships when it comes to the well-known sources, such as the ability to build strategies (Elbers et al. 2021), foster the appropriate managerial skills to fulfil the monitoring and reporting requirements (Claeyé 2014), and successfully align with changing development fads (Tvedt 2006). There are, however, constant legitimacy negotiations over who has the capacity and ability to define the overall agenda, and the nature of citizenship that is to be promoted in civic education.

Being regarded as legitimate by partners is essential for KRC as it is highly dependent on international funding. In 2020, it received funding from ten different sources (KRC 2021), the largest of which was the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a national facility coordinating support of democratization, human rights, and accountability, supported by several donor countries; INGOs such as CARE and HIVOS, and institutions such as the EU and the World Food Programme also provided funding. Successfully partnering with such an array of well-established international partners shows that, over the years, KRC has gained legitimacy as a professional development NGO capable of strategic planning and programme implementation, and also of reporting their operations effectively according to various accountability guidelines. In the interviews, such management competencies were mostly taken for granted and not much reflected on by KRC staff; learning from international management trends was discussed much more. Knowledge of new international monitoring and evaluation approaches, such as appreciative inquiry (Cooperider and Whitney 1999), outcome harvesting, and most significant change, were mentioned as the means to improve KRC's relationships with the communities, rather than as something imposed by donors to be used by KRC. As a senior member described the idea of appreciative inquiry: "[Y]ou are there to facilitate a process that can enable these communities to manage themselves. (…) [W]hen you go to the community, you do not look at the bad things only, but get the good things and build on that."

The main issue concerning legitimacy was the NGO's limited ability to define agendas and approaches in its relations with partners. The staff narrated how KRC started by providing direct, tangible support to communities, shifting to micro-credits and agriculture, and, later, to civic education and peace. These shifts resonate with similar moves – from immediate support to promoting advocacy and education, and from charity and handouts to communities to education to ensure sustainable development (Scherz 2014) – in the field of development NGOs in general. For KRC, the funding offered to livelihood programmes, such as agriculture and microfinance, has decreased owing to a growing preference for issues such Gender-Based Violence (GBV), human rights, refugee education and settlements, peace and conflict education, and civic education. According to KRC's annual report, the organization received approximately 60% of its income for civic education and GBV, that is 52.83% and 7.18%, respectively (KRC 2021). According to an interviewed board member, the overall 'rigidity' of donors has increased in recent years, and the specific emphasis on rights has side-lined space for economic empowerment activities KRC considers important:

> In the past, (…) most of the donors used to give KRC a lot of responsibility and freedom to undertake the work they considered most important. But nowadays, much of the work of KRC is dictated by the donors. KRC can use its knowledge and its experiences to try modifying some of their requirements or objectives, but in the end, most donors are controlling, as they think they know best, and that has curtailed the ability of KRC to implement its vision and mission which was previously quite successfully implemented. I think that with the donors' input, we are much more forced to add vocative rights.

This extract introduces the main topic of negotiation connected with good citizenship and how it can best be supported. In KRC experience, according to the same board member, "[W]hat donors want to see is success stories, they want to see people really asking for their rights." The civic education generously supported by international collaborators is largely driven by notions such as accountable leadership, equality, freedoms, and democracy. Consequently, a 'good citizen' implies one who is capable of standing up for their rights by holding leadership to account, and demonstrating the ability to participate in electoral democracy by voting for competent leaders. It must be noted that these descriptions reflect donor rather than local terminologies. A case was cited in the interviews where this challenge was addressed: all the Ugandan collaborators in civic education programmes supported by the DGF formed a steering committee, which "sat down and developed a civic education curriculum, so it was not a donor setting, but combination of ideas from civil society players", as explained by a member of KRC staff. However, the implementation of the programme was still very much embedded in donor vocabularies and assumptions rather than in contextualized situations in the communities. For instance, the programme addressed 'knowledge gaps’ in civil and political rights in 12 diverse modules, such as “citizenship, human rights, democracy and multiparty system, good governance and service delivery” (KRC 2018, 7), which were gaps predominantly identified by donors and NGOs rather than the communities. The work of crafting the education agenda resonates with what Englund (2006, 70-98) observed in human rights education in Malawi, where English terms detached from villagers’ realities were often used, and community members’ questions side-lined to fit the training agenda.

The ideal of good, competent, and active citizens promoted in the current civic education programme guided by DGF seems partly to align with KRC’s own development philosophy of ‘good citizenship’ as being “economically empowered to demand for rights but also hold leaders to account” (KRC 2019). However, negotiations over legitimacy intensify when the funding provided is rigid and not meant to fulfil KRC’s aspirations for economic empowerment of the communities with which it works. Indeed, given that funding for livelihood programmes has diminished, in some communities KRC only runs civic education, which they see both as falling short of their vision and as unable to resonate with lived experience in the communities, where livelihood challenges need to be addressed. As a staff member points out, “[I]t is hard to separate civic education from livelihood programmes; these two work hand in hand. The small-holder farmer is a whole citizen.”

Here, the description of the ‘good citizen’, based on KRC staff understanding of community ideas of what makes a good citizen, is somewhat distant from the idea fostered in the civic education programmes implemented in collaboration with international partners. Consequently, KRC feels that its experience and knowledge of the dynamics in communities are not regarded as legitimate contributions to the overall design of joint development programmes; rather, due to funding imperatives, the NGO is forced to implement activities that only partially resonate with its own mission.

## Encounters with community members

In this section, the focus is on the legitimacy negotiations that take place in encounters between KRC and the communities it seeks to empower. As discussed above, when an NGO receives external funding, its legitimacy negotiations with communities are necessarily intertwined with those with their development partners. Features such as avoiding direct handouts to communities might increase their legitimacy in the eyes of international collaborators but simultaneously decrease it in the perceptions of communities who might interpret such tactics as the NGO’s failure to fulfil its obligations in reciprocal patronage (Scherz 2014, 135). Therefore, NGOs need to undertake balancing acts (Matelski et al. 2021) to maintain their legitimacy in both relationships. We argue that due to its long-term presence in the area, KRC is perceived as a legitimate actor by local communities but must, nevertheless, shape its initiatives according to aspirations that community members consider appropriate. For example, community members’ conceptions of ‘good citizenship’ emphasize firm residency, a secure livelihood, and community contribution, which diverge from the image of ‘good citizenship’ – based on demanding the realization of rights and holding leaders accountable – promoted by KRC in its current, externally funded, civic education programmes.

For NGOs situated in urban centres, the increased distance from rural communities and the consequent gap between NGO agendas and community needs creates a typical legitimacy challenge (Banks et al. 2015). In the context of human rights NGOs in East Africa, Mutua (2009) argues that they lack legitimacy in the eyes of rural populations due to their being situated in capital cities, elitist, and not having continuous contact with rural areas. In contrast, KRC has always worked closely with rural communities, including the two study communities in Harugongo Sub-County in Kabarole District, and only recently opened an office in the city to coordinate various activities around the country (Shariff 2022). Additionally, its identity has remained one of a community development organization despite the changes in KRC's focus that have taken place since its establishment. As one senior staff member narrates, KRC's first interventions were "handouts, such as cows, pigs and grants", but for the past fifteen years or more "KRC does not give grants, we give knowledge". The shift from tangible provision to knowledge distribution has not always strengthened the legitimacy of KRC in the communities; indeed, the interview participant adds that it has taken a long time, but communities have started "demanding information and knowledge" instead of grants and handouts. At about the same time, however, the second author's informal discussions while staying in the communities showed that whereas some residents appreciated the civic education currently on offer, many still connect KRC with loans and grants, and hoped the organization would return to those approaches. This resonates with Sherz's (2014) findings on an NGO that shifted from handouts to education when addressing the issue of HIV/AIDS orphans in rural Uganda; some people ceased to participate in NGO activities and "be good clients [as] the patron was also not good" (Sherz 2014, 141) when the NGO refused to help with school fees and household items.

Different community members can have different perceptions of what makes an appropriate NGO and what its relationship with the communities should be: some prioritize direct help and tangible provisions, while others are keen to learn about new issues and adopt new practices. Reflecting this, KRC's own perception of its relationship with communities was ambiguous. According to KRC's underlying philosophy, which was mentioned in many interviews, first, the KRC pursues an empowerment approach that builds on the strengths of the communities, and second, any programme – whether in civic education, human rights, or peace education – ought to be grounded in economic empowerment. Yet there seems to be a continuous tension between the NGO's roles as a mere 'facilitator' and the 'main actor'. Terminology such as "helping, educating, changing, empowering, training, sensitising, and transforming" (KRC 2011; 2019), where the NGO is the most active actor who relates with 'ignorant' communities in need of their interventions, has a constant presence in KRC documents and interviews. Additionally, undertaking the principle of economic empowerment and combining agricultural programmes with civic education has not been easy due to funding structures. The fact that civic education, well-funded at over 50% of the budget, lacks the component of economic empowerment is a point of concern for KRC. In the past, these two have been successfully combined, as one member of staff pointed out:

> [S]o, the team from the human rights would come and train microfinance associations on issues of human rights, on issues of peace building; eventually we found that the ones in the agricultural development side will pick the issues faster, and KRC realized increasingly that you cannot start with a hungry man.

The ideas of community members relating to good citizenship which were articulated in the interviews seem to resonate well with KRC philosophy on the intertwined nature of economic well-being and citizenship aspirations. However, whereas KRC clearly espoused the view that citizenship is a constitutional matter, the meanings that community members applied to citizenship revolved around being a good and recognized resident in the local area. In Rutooro, the language used in the interviews, the word *omwikazi* was frequently used to translate the English term 'citizen', and literally refers to a resident or member of a community, county, or country more broadly. Thus, it could be used to describe community membership at different levels, including the national level. Predominantly, however, when community members discussed the ladders of citizenship, they referred to local residency and good community membership, and citizenship as membership in the state was rarely discussed, even when prompted (Bananuka, Kontinen and Holma 2022).

A good citizen in the community members’ reflections was, typically, someone who had lived in the community for a substantial period of time, who had a reliable source of income, participated in community affairs, and had good relationships with others. According to the interviews, good residence qualities included a readiness to attend burials and other community events, and to undertake shared tasks such as cleaning water sources. In a few interviews, good citizenship related to the state was mentioned. For instance, a male member of a community said that a good citizen must “attend community meetings and listen to what the government says”, and further, “must follow government laws, and ought to pay taxes”. Some participants also mentioned an awareness of rights as a one of the characteristics of a good citizen, as another male community member summarized:

> A good citizen is always good at saving money and good at financial management as well as good at paying his loans. A good citizen must be patient, attend church regularly, cooperative with fellow community members, be part of community work and must be aware of his or her rights and freedom so that he or she can always fight for his or her and other people’s rights in the community.

When community members reflected on how they could “climb the ladder” (Bananuka, Kontinen and Holma 2022), that is, improve themselves as a citizen, they frequently mentioned issues such as having a better source of income and the financial ability to educate their children. As one female community member noted when discussing ladder positions ranging from one to five: “A level five, a good citizen, is one with a good income that they may be getting either from agriculture like having plantations, herds of cattle, or a job that could be employing them (…) Personally, I am at level four because I don’t have my own home yet as am still constructing a home.”

Thus, in general, achieving better citizenship, according to community members, was predominantly about improving one’s livelihood and being a contributing member of the community. This idea of the route to better citizenship differed from that held in KRC’s current civic education programme, where achieving an understanding of one’s rights and learning practical advocacy skills, such as writing petitions and organizing demonstrations, were emphasized. Additionally, while community members had quite strong views of what, for them, constitutes good citizenship, KRC staff often framed them in interviews as being ‘ignorant’ of appropriate citizenship based on awareness of rights and duties in their relationship with the state, especially when it came to service provision. As reflected by a KRC staff member, “There is no way you can expect someone to go and demand a service he or she doesn’t know [about]; the first point is for them to learn or to mind what is that service that they are required to ask, and from who, when, and how to ask.” Nevertheless, views of what is considered good and legitimate citizenship are not carved in stone. Most development initiatives are geared towards promoting social change (McGee and Pettit 2020), and in this case, have inspired changes in the ideals and practices of citizenship in the community witnessed by KRC, as a senior member narrates:

> [W]e started civic education in 2013. Then, there was a lot of fear within the community and people could not sit and

> face their leaders. But through our engagements, through community awareness meetings, working with community structures, and training and re-training them, people started coming up talking [through] their issues without fear.

Therefore, the ongoing negotiations between whether good citizenship means being a recognized community member or someone who actively demands their rights from power holders do not only relate to different perceptions implicit in community-NGO-donor encounters; they are also part of what Pettit (2016) calls the civic habitus, which has been historically formed through people's lived experiences of encounters with power holders. Such habitus does not change rapidly and, as KRC staff reflected, despite some change, fear still pertains to community encounters with service providers and civil servants, resulting in passive rather than active citizenship when it comes to claiming rights.

## Encounters with the government

In this section, we discuss KRC legitimacy negotiations with the Ugandan Government, which in general, range from collaboration in areas such as poverty reduction (Muhumuza 2010) to contestation related to good governance, democracy, and human rights (Mutua 2009). NGO legitimacy is shaped by national legislation and encounters with authoritarian political environments as well as in everyday interactions with councillors at different levels of local government. In Uganda, the government system in rural areas consists of local councils at village (LC1), parish (LC2), sub-county (LC3), county (LC4), and district (LC5) levels. In parallel with the elected councils, there are also appointed administrators and technical personnel employed by the government, which all are part of NGO encounters with bureaucracy.

Like any other established NGO in Uganda, KRC needs to negotiate its legitimacy in what is ultimately a restricted environment, which the literature characterizes as shrinking civic space (Buyse 2018; Popplewell 2018). In many countries, Uganda included, governments have limited the operating space of NGOs, especially those focusing on human rights and good governance. Restrictive measures have included de-registering NGOs or freezing their bank accounts, as well as introducing new, complicated, bureaucratic procedures of registration and reporting. Moreover, NGOs have been de-legitimated for their 'non-African', imperialistic, and colonial agendas, and accused of being foreign agents. In Uganda, the NGO Act 2016 determines the legal legitimacy of NGOs, and the resulting NGO regulations provide a detailed, increasingly restrictive framework for registration and reporting. A recent exemplification of this took place in August 2021 when the NGO regulatory board suspended over 50 NGOs for failing to comply with the NGO Act 2016, accusing them, among other things, of working with expired permits or failing to file their annual returns and accounting audits (Aljazeera 2021; Musoke 2021).

Accordingly, KRC's annual report (KRC 2021, 10) notes of its operating environment that "the state of civil society and civic space in Uganda as argued across the different civic discourse spectra, was described as continually shrinking". An example of the restrictive measures with direct impact to KRC's funding environment was President Museveni's order in February 2021 to suspend the DGF, one of KRC's main funders in 2020 (Mufumba 2021). The DGF is supported by seven donor countries with a vision of "a Uganda where citizens are empowered to engage in democratic governance and the state upholds citizens' rights"[1] Under its current programme (2018-2022), KRC is supposed to promote democratic processes that build citizen-state relationships; citizen empowerment, engagement, and accountability; and protection of human rights, access to justice, and gender equality. The DGF facility was suspended despite its explicit policy of aligning with Uganda's national priorities and commitments, such as the National Action Plan for Human Rights, National Development Plan II, the National Gender Policy, and the Constitution of Uganda. In June 2022, President Museveni allowed its reopening for a period of six months under specific conditions.

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[1] See: https://www.dgf.ug/

In a similar vein, representatives of KRC continually stated that, according to the organization, citizenship is a "constitutional matter". Chapter Three in the Constitution of Uganda (1995, with amendments in 2017), defines the criteria for attaining the status of citizenship. It also presents an extensive list of citizens' duties, starting from the duty to respect the national anthem, flag, coat of arms, and currency. In addition to issues such as paying taxes, the duties also include "combat[ting] corruption and misuse or wastage of public property" and "respect[ing] the rights and freedoms of others". However, taking this duty seriously is not always welcomed, as described by a senior KRC staff member: "[I]f you are fighting corruption, when you are fighting issues of human rights, when you are demanding for accountability, the leaders look at you as an enemy because you are exposing them, opening people's eyes".

Chapter Four of the constitution, titled "Protection and promotion of fundamental and other human rights and freedoms", discusses in detail the human rights protected by the constitution. The extensive list includes "the freedom of speech and expression", "freedom to assemble and to demonstrate together with others peacefully and unarmed and to petition", and "freedom of association which shall include the freedom to form and join associations or unions, including trade unions and political and other civic organisations". Under the rubric of civic rights and activities, it is guaranteed, first, that "every Uganda citizen has the right to participate in the affairs of government", and the "right to participate in peaceful activities to influence the policies of government through civic organisations". The listed freedoms and rights are among those included in the civic space monitoring on CIVICUS[2] that categorizes Uganda as 'repressed'. Thus, there are gaps between the constitution and its implementation; yet if NGOs point out these gaps it can lead to their legitimacy being questioned by the government.

The dynamics of NGO legitimacy negotiations resonate with Tapscott's (2021) discussion of citizens' encounters with what she calls the 'arbitrary state', where, she argues, citizens' lived experiences revolve around notions of violence, governance, and uncertainty, rather than elements such as trust in the government's ability to secure basic social protection. Similarly, rather than being able to trust the government to secure citizens' constitutional rights, NGOs engage in contestations with the state over its failure to realize its own constitution, and face a variety of restrictions while doing so. Earlier scholarship has pointed out the historical trajectories that led to the contemporary situation. For example, Chibita and Fourier (2007, 23) conclude their extensive history of participation in Uganda by arguing that Ugandan leaders have not had a "strong enough sense of security to open up participatory democratic space" due to the legacies of colonialism's indirect rule, the chaos and violence in post-independence, and the non-party era until 2004. This is also reflected in leaders' low tolerance for NGOs labelled 'political', often meaning those dealing with human rights (Dicklitch 2001). As Dicklitch and Lwanga (2003, 482) argue, historical legacies have created a "culture of political apathy and fear"; thus, Ugandans are continuously entangled in the "politics of being non-political" (Dicklitch and Lwanga 2003, 509). Additionally, ethnic differences intensified in the colonial era have resulted in Uganda's not having "cohesion as nation" (Cheney 2004); people's organization is predominantly ethnicity-based, and ethnic communities rather than the state form important fora for rights, responsibilities, and belonging. Surprising, ethnic belonging was not extensively discussed by KRC staff, perhaps due to the relative homogeneity of the inhabitants in the study area.

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[2] See: https://monitor.civicus.org/

In the case of KRC, relationships with the state are often realized in everyday encounters with local councils and government employees. At the local level, district councils (LC5), headed by a chairperson and executive committee, are responsible for governing service provision, which is practically implemented by the civil servants such as teachers or health workers, who were also among those discussed in relation to civic education as actors responsible for realizing government services. Therefore, while KRC has remained legitimate in terms of its registration and permission to function, it has encountered what some staff called "subversive tendencies" in local encounters. As a senior staff member noted, "There were several instances where local government leaders started accusing us of mobilizing citizens against them. Yet we conduct public meetings where they are also invited, although most times they do not turn up or give feedback."

The civic education KRC conducted for community members taught them to hold elected leaders accountable. In some instances, local people had been empowered to monitor the quality of social services such as local access roads, schools, and health centres. From the government official's point of view, KRC might have agitated people against their leaders. As one of the government officials complained in an interview:

> For long KRC tried to fight me by making bad reports about [me], for example, alleging corruption and things like that. (…) KRC ought to change concerning the message to local people. (…) Because they used to teach people rights and they had started to fight us…People had started fighting us, asking for accountability, asking for this and asking for that, people started to rise up against us.

However, KRC also reported on many instances of good collaboration when addressing certain issues, such as mending a village road after community demonstrations demanding better access to the market. The opinions of some local government officials also change, as one of them narrates:

> I went and talked to staff from KRC and later started understanding them, after which I realized that they are good people. I realized that we also have our responsibilities as leaders even when people were demanding their rights. KRC has taught people their rights and KRC impressed me because when they are talking about rights they go ahead to tell about responsibility. That rights move together with responsibility.

The ambiguity in local government responses reflects diverse views of the basic idea of the state-citizens relationship and the related ideas of good citizenship and appropriate citizen behaviour. Both the government and KRC have a fundamental understanding of a good citizen as law-abiding. From there, research participants frequently mentioned that KRC draws on the notion of citizenship as determined by the constitution, and further, as observed by a staff member, it "normally link[s] citizenship to service delivery", meaning that a citizen of Uganda is entitled to certain services provided by the state. As discussed above, KRC's current, externally funded, civic education programme rests on the idea that people are not knowledgeable about the constitution and, therefore, they need to be educated about their rights if they are to mobilize to demand them from the local duty-bearers. In their accounts, local leaders suggested that good citizens were not active in demanding their rights but, as defined by a village council (LC1) leader, "exemplary, able to embrace government programs, able to be looked at as an epitome of excellence, [and] participating in various activities that affect his community". Rather than civic education, local leaders emphasized learning good citizenship through upbringing and influence from elders and local leaders. Moreover, good citizenship had tangible characteristics, as the council leader continued: "When we go for home visits, there are standards that we look at in a home. One, there should be a hand washing facility, there should be a rack where kitchen utensils are dried, the children in that home should be going to school."

Some leaders were sceptical about the role of NGOs in fostering appropriate citizenship. A chairperson questioned their legitimacy as "most NGOs stress rights but not responsibilities and obligations". His main argument was that NGOs pay little attention to educating communities to perform their obligations to family and government; rather, they teach them to demand 'everything' from the government, as also observed by a local development officer: "You find that even a small community demand[s] a school, then it starts to want a health centre, then they need water, they need electricity, and a lot of that." Instead, he called for a balance between demands and contributions, thus assigning some responsibility for their own well-being to citizens.

Ultimately, in terms of its relationships with the government in Uganda's semi-authoritarian political climate, the legitimacy of the NGO and its programmes for fostering citizenship revolves around balancing the rights and obligations of citizens in the civic education it sponsors (Brisset-Foucault 2019). To maintain its legitimacy, KRC continuously interacts with the government at various levels such as local councils, parliament, and government ministries responsible for specific services, where these contestations are addressed in diverse ways, such as conducting shared meetings in communities and inviting MPs to breakfast discussions.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, using KRC as a case study of a Ugandan development NGO that engages in civic education, we identified three legitimacy audiences of significance. First, relationships with international collaborators are essential for ensuring financial resources, building networks, and gaining opportunities to learn new ideas and approaches. Second, building relationships with community members is vital in order to motivate them to participate in NGO initiatives and undertake the changes required to realize the NGO's mission. Third, relationships with the government at different levels ensure that the NGO can exist, implement projects without harassment and, further, engage the local government in their programmes to ensure that the changes they aspire to achieve take place. In terms of legitimacy, international collaborations require NGOs to be professionally managed and aligned with the funders' own programme goals; meanwhile, communities value continuous presence and readiness to help, and the government prioritizes NGOs as collaborators rather than contestants. With regard to the notion of citizenship, the goal of international collaborators is to nurture active citizens ready to demand the realization of their rights, communities promote good residency that is demonstrated by a steady income and contributing to local concerns, and the government seeks citizens that fulfil their obligations. Consequently, the most legitimate support the NGO could offer in terms of citizenship, as far as development partners were concerned, was civic education and mobilization; for community members it was support for agriculture and other livelihood efforts; while for the government it was ensuring that people know and perform their obligations.

The ideal of a good citizen as articulated by community members and local government

– that is, someone who takes care of their responsibilities and contributes to local development – resonated with each other, with the added emphasis of the livelihood support by the KRC among community members; meanwhile, the ideal of a claim-making, active citizen that holds the government accountable was introduced by international collaborators and the development field more broadly. In turn, the diverse ideals and expectations of 'good citizenship' had equally diverse assumptions concerning the relationship between state and citizens, with KRC positioned as a mediator between these different ideals. The case illustrates how the civic habits (Pettit 2016) of communities are embedded in the historically passive political culture in Uganda (Dicklitch and Lwanga 2003), where contesting the authorities is not common; it also demonstrates that people struggling with their daily livelihoods prioritize productive activities and living in harmony with each other in expectation of mutual help in close interdependence (Scherz 2014).

The article contributes to the literature on the organizational legitimacy of development NGOs by scrutinizing the perspective of one Ugandan NGO in its multiple relationships. In resonance with recent research, our findings show that, first, maintaining NGO legitimacy requires a continuous renegotiation of what is regarded as the 'good' in a variety of relationships (Egholm et al. 2020); second, that an appropriate NGO is constructed in encounters with diverse legitimizing audiences (Lister 2003); and, third, that NGOs need to maintain constant "balancing acts" (Matelski et al. 2021) if they are to remain sufficiently legitimate in all their significant relationships. The case of KRC in Uganda makes it apparent that legitimacy was an ongoing element of its relationship with three main legitimizing audiences. Negotiations concerned both the legitimacy of the NGO in general and the content and means of performance of its programme for fostering citizenship. The negotiations were actualized in practical encounters but were related to the wider international field of development and historically formed political dynamics in Uganda. In conclusion, we argue that maintaining NGO legitimacy involves continuous negotiation of its relationships, something applicable to an organization of any size and purpose, while the identification of the significant legitimizing audiences and the specific characteristics of negotiations are always contextual. Thus, each case and context require proper examination and analysis, whether for academic exploration or in order to design relevant forms of support from international collaborators.

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