“The Survival of the Fittest”

A qualitative exploration of legitimacy work of a local developing NGO in the South

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Abstract

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Human service organizations like local developing NGOs (non-governmental organizations) play a key role in social work in developing countries, especially in those societies with weak public and private social service provisions. In order to survive and carry out their work it is essential that NGOs ensure legitimacy from their external stakeholders, as it is the stakeholders who grant NGOs their legitimacy. However, ensuring legitimacy can be challenging for human service organizations, especially for those operating in very heterogeneous societies as it can be very difficult to satisfy all stakeholders and take into consideration all elements in these contexts. The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore via a single-case study how a local developing NGO in a developing society manages to gain and maintain legitimacy in very highly institutional settings with many different stakeholders. In this context, ethnographic methods were applied, and the empirical data consisted of qualitative interviews with some key staff members of a well-established Indian NGO, different documents, and some personal observations conducted during the field work. To analyze the empirical data, I applied e.g. institutional theory about organizational legitimacy work. This study found in line with previous research that ensuring legitimacy can be a intricate and challenging process for a local developing NGO, as it may need to undergo complex social processes and employ a wide variety of strategies and tools, ranging from conformism to manipulation, in order to ensure legitimacy from different stakeholders in highly institutional settings. This study also found that in order to protect their agency during the legitimacy work, different organizational tools, including power, may be needed. This study has indicated the need to conduct ongoing empirical and qualitative research about legitimacy work of the local NGO sector in developing countries, as this type of research may yield vital knowledge and insights which can inspire NGO practitioners to conduct legitimacy work in manner that may increase the survival chances of their organization and social work for underprivileged and poor.

Key words: NGO, organizational legitimacy, legitimacy strategies, institutional work

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1. Introduction

Organizational legitimacy is not given, but must be earned (Pfeffer & Salancik 1993), and human service organizations along with all other organizations need to ensure legitimacy from external stakeholders as legitimacy is fundamental to organizational survival (Suchman 1995; Hasenfeld 2010). 'Legitimacy' refers here to the assumption that organizations or their actions are *"desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions"* (Suchman 1995:574). This thesis explores legitimacy work within the local developing NGO sector in the South[1], with *legitimacy work* implying a cultural and interpretive process where NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) attempt to ensure legitimacy from external stakeholders (Suchman 1995; Landau et al. 2014:1321).

Organizations are social actors, who desire *certainties* and need to act as non-action will have consequences (Thompson 2003). From institutional perspectives, organizations are not isolated, but incorporated into a greater social scheme where interaction and negotiations occur, since entities that grant them legitimacy are situated outside the organizations. All organizations rely more or less on external resources for their existence, and it is paramount that their goals and activities are considered legitimate (Pfeffer & Salancik 1993:193-259; Suchman 1995), as organizations that possess legitimacy attract more easily those resources, support and endorsement from external stakeholders which are required to survive and carry out their work (Suchman 1995; Landau et al. 2014:1322). Since it is impossible for organizations to fully satisfy all stakeholders, legitimacy work becomes an essential organizational task (Suchman 1995). Organizations can in this context draw on a variety of strategies, since they possess *agency*, meaning that organizations are capable of making independent choices and actions when faced with challenges, dilemmas, and ambiguities (Battilana & D'Aunno 2009:45-47). Yet, ensuring legitimacy can be very challenging, and those organizations that fail to ensure legitimacy risk being viewed as illegitimate, sloppy or irrelevant (Suchman 1995:574-586).

Problem formulation

Human service organizations, which local developing NGOs fall under the category of (Cabedo et.al 2018), are "archetypically institutionalized", meaning that their survival and

[1] The term "NGOs in the South" is often utilized in development literature to categorize NGOs from less developed countries. See e.g. Lister (2003), Hulme & Edward's (2013), and Lewis & Kanji (2009)

advancement are not solely based on technical accomplishments, but predominantly on their alignment with dominant cultural symbols and belief systems in the general society (Hasenfeld 2010:14-15). According to Hasenfeld (2010), human service organizations have to continuously address legitimacy due to cyclical legitimacy crises, which may be triggered if they fail to solve social problems etc. Legitimacy work is notably challenging for human service organizations operating in very heterogeneous milieus, as these organizations tend to experience instability due to various factors in the external environment such as pluralism; turbulence, opposition, competing ideologies, diverse interest groups with conflicting values & norms; complex ethnic heterogeneity etc. (ibid:15-16).

In this thesis I will explore legitimacy work in the local developing NGO sector in the South, as this sector seems conducive to study due to its many different stakeholders, high dependency on external aid, and many uncertainties (e.g. Karim:1996:138; Tandon 1996:53-54; Lister 2003; Banks, Hulme & Edwards 2015:710). NGOs play an increasingly important role in developing countries (Lewis & Kanji 2009; Banks *et al.* 2015:707), especially in societies with weak public sectors (Hulme & Edwards 2013a:4-6). Yet, according to existing literature, legitimacy issues are unavoidable whenever NGOs act and conduct their work (Atack 1999:855), as the developing NGO sector is bound to attract uncertainties and controversies due to its nature, growth and huge aid flow (Atack 1999; Thomas et al.2008:40). NGOs are mission-driven (Zhou & Ye 2019:849) sovereign organizations claiming to serve the disadvantaged in a non-profit and non-political manner, and such factors alone warrant studies about NGO *legitimacy* (Atack 1999:855, 858; Pearce 2013:258). Then there is existing research describing e.g. an 'accountability movement', which is a growing tendency amongst funders and government agencies demanding that nonprofits e.g. document their efficiency and accomplishments (Carman 2010), and how many nonprofits struggle to meet demands from their stakeholders (Karim 1996; Carman 2010). The literature offers different narratives about the consequences stakeholders' demands have for NGOs. There are e.g. researchers/critics claiming that high aid dependency makes NGOs less independent and autonomous (Lewis & Kanji 2009:176), and that it encourages them to align their behaviour and actions with funders' requirements at the expense of relationships with local stakeholders, which are also considered key to NGO legitimacy (Karim:1996:138; Hulme & Edwards, 2013b: 282; Banks *et al.* 2015). Other researchers point out that although stakeholders' demands, which can be conflicting and ambiguous, may encourage NGOs to constantly adjust their rhetoric to satisfy their different stakeholders, many NGOs desire to be independent mission driven agents (Ebrahim 2003:198).

Although NGO legitimacy is poorly theorized and understood within development research (Lister 2003), NGO researchers have stated similarly to Hasenfeld (2010), that challenges of developing NGOs may trigger legitimacy crises (e.g. Hulme & Edwards 2013b: 282). Indian NGOs, which have grown exponentially in numbers since the 1990s (Yesudhas 2019:123), operate in a very heterogeneous society with great social, cultural, ethnic and religious differences (e.g. UNRISD 2010; Sharma 2012), and a weak public sector where central and state governments encourage NGOs to fill in governmental gaps (Ayinagadda 2013:56). I will explore how a local NGO in India manages to conduct legitimacy work in highly institutional settings with many stakeholders to relate to.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose is to qualitatively explore legitimacy work within the local developing NGO sector via a single-case study. I will analyze, from social constructivist optics, what strategies may be employed in order to ensure legitimacy from external stakeholders in highly institutional settings, and what measures are taken to protect organizational agency during this process. My case will be a local NGO in India. The research questions that will drive my research forward will be the following:

- ***What strategies are employed to gain legitimacy from external stakeholders?***
- ***What kind of strategies are utilized to protect gained legitimacy?***
- ***What actions are initiated by the NGO to protect its agency during the legitimacy work?***

Background and delimitations

Stakeholders/audiences: ‘Stakeholders’ refers to external actors that NGOs directly rely on for material and moral support in order to survive and carry out their work. “Audiences”, a term utilized by some organizational theorists (e.g. Suchman 1995; Gnes & Vermeulen 2019), refers to stakeholders, potential stakeholders and other social actors in NGOs’ external environments.

Legitimacy: NGO legitimacy is a multifaceted and dynamic concept which can be defined in various ways (Lister 2003, Gnes & Vermeulen 2019), but ‘legitimacy’ will here be defined and comprehended with the help of Suchman’s (1995) institutional definition in his article *“Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches”*, since Suchman’s definition is widely utilized in organizational literature (Johnson et al. 2006:56), and because it encompasses various dimensions, including the cultural environments and the influence of external audiences (Suchman 1995:573), which is conducive when considering that my research is focusing on NGOs in the South that operate in very heterogeneous environments with many different stakeholders. According to Suchman, 'organizational legitimacy' is a socially constructed concept based on a combination of organizational behaviour and collective beliefs of certain groups in society. Suchman (1995:574) defines legitimacy like this: *"Legitimacy is a generalized 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".* Suchman (1995:573), however, states that organizational legitimacy is multifaceted, since it "operates differently in different contexts" and because the effect of gained legitimacy may vary and depends on an organization's challenges. As my main purpose is to explore legitimacy work processes, I will refrain from analyzing actual effects of legitimacy work as organizations' own justification to legitimacy may be false (Gnees & Vermeulen 2019:2019)

Local developing NGOs: The NGO sector is very diverse in terms of roles, functions and size; and NGOs are also being categorized as human service organizations; nonprofit, voluntary organizations etc. NGOs are, however, fundamentally independent non-governmental organizations whose drive is non-profit work (e.g. Lewis & Kanji 2009; Gnes & Vermeulen 2019, Srivastava *et al*. 2013). *Local developing NGOs* refers here to local NGOs in less developed societies, that conduct different types of developing work (social/economic/ political) with main beneficiaries being the underprivileged and poor (e.g. Lewis & Kanji 2009). This thesis focuses on formal non-membership NGOs, that have external stakeholders and rely on external aid. Due to the broad scope of NGOs' work and roles, my focus is narrowed down to legitimacy work related to a single NGO project/activity, a subject not commonly researched (Cabedo et al.2018:329). I will focus on educational projects for poor children due to the mitigating effect that e.g. primary education can have on poverty and social inequality in developing countries (Birchler & Michaelowa 2016:42).

2. Literature review

Scientific progress can be achieved by e.g. taking into account existing research related to one's own study (Tanggaard & Brinkmann 2015:530). I have drawn upon peer reviewed articles and other academic literature, primarily found via Lund University's database *LUB Search*, Copenhagen University's equivalent database *REX* (soeg.kb.dk) and Google Scholar. I utilized search word combinations like: *(Local) NGO + legitimacy*; *NGO + primary education/children's education*. I also employed terms like 'nonprofits' or 'human service organizations', in combination with concepts associated with organizational legitimacy, and terms like *'India'* and *'developing countries'*. I also applied *the snowball effect*, where found references where looked up in *Lub SEARCH* and *REX.*

Legitimacy work: introduction

There is limited research about legitimacy of NGO projects/activities (Cabedo et al. 2018:329), and I found few qualitative in-depth studies about legitimacy work of local NGOs in the South. There is, nonetheless, a growing number of research about legitimacy and related subjects of the general NGO/nonprofit sector (Convey et al.2015:1078; Cabedo et al.2018:329), some of which I have found fruitful to include. In existing literature, developing NGOs are described as complex actors (Ebrahim 2003) operating in "a complex and messy terrain" (Hulme & Edwards 2013:4), where they face different challenges which can be difficult to handle due to limited resources, high external demands etc. (Atack 1999:862; Banks, Hulme & Edwards 2015). In line with institutional theory, developing literature positions NGOs in a broad *aid- and ecosystem* (Banks, Hulme & Edwards 2015:715), with many stakeholders to relate to e.g. beneficiaries, donors and other partners (Tandon 1996:53-54; Edwards & Hulme 1996a:8; Lister 2003). In this context, the NGOs are said to e.g. *"juggle a delicate balancing act between institutional and developmental imperatives that require close but potentially conflicting relationships with states, donors, partners and constituents"* (Banks, Hulme & Edwards 2015:715).

Compliance, accountability, performance, and managerialism

NGO researchers commonly link NGO legitimacy with interrelated concepts like 'compliance', 'accountability, and 'performance' (see e.g. Edwards & Hulme 1996; Lister 2003:177; Thomas et al. 2008; Jakimow 2010). Thomas et al. (2008), for example, who have studied legitimacy in the South Asian NGO sector, describe accountability as *"a powerful tool for assessing NGO legitimacy and thus a powerful weapon for granting or withholding legitimacy"* (Thomas et al. 2008:38), and according to Edwards & Hulme (1996a:3-8) effective performance is fundamental to legitimacy of development work.

Accountability is a multidimensional concept that emerged in the NGO/nonprofit sector due to e.g. suspicions of wrongdoings, failure to help beneficiaries etc. (Edwards & Hulme 1996a:6-9; Ebrahim 2003:191-192, Carman 2010). 'Accountability' refers to NGOs' reporting work to stakeholders and authorities, or positions where NGOs are being held accountable for their spendings and actions (Edwards & Hulme 1996a:8,11). NGOs may effectuate accountability *upwards* towards donors and higher authorities, and *downwards* towards beneficiaries and local communities (Ebrahim 2003:200; Hulme & Edwards 2013:8), with the goal of ensuring legitimacy; to improve their own services and decisions; and to be regarded as successful (Carman 2010:256-259). Robust accountability procedures also help NGOs identify and address warning signals (Edwards & Hulmen 1996a:3-8). Accountability efforts of nonprofits may be based on *performance,* with emphasis on outcomes and results, or *compliance* where nonprofit conform to specific rules, processes and procedures (e.g. Carman 2010). According to Edwards & Hulme (1996a:3-8) accountability mechanisms are only effective if NGOs meet certain criteria such as aligning their goals with specific rules or performance criteria, yet it is *transparent accounting,* which is fundamental regarding legitimacy of development work. The NGOs should conduct genuine reporting about their achievements; spendings etc. (ibid.); and give detailed accounts of their activities (Cabedo et al. 2008:344). Carman (2010:257-259) states that although nonprofits may face overlapping and conflicting accountability demands from funders, and that accountability measures may overburden them and affect their social work, most nonprofits comply with donors' demands due to worries about funding.

Managerialism or its elements may also ensure or enhance NGO legitimacy (e.g. Jakimow 2010; Suarez & Gaugerty 2016:2634; Willner 2019; Appe 2016:188). 'Managerialism' refers to a New Public Management model based on the notion that nonprofits run most efficiently with market based strategies and approaches (Willner 2019:225, 241) such as professionalization, extensive monitoring or evaluation, and modern management tools (Suarez & Gugerty 2016:2618, 2633). According to e.g. Willner (2019:224,241), managerialism has become widespread in the nonprofit sector due to the notion that it will positively influence organizations' operations, funding opportunities and success. In line with this, a study by Suarez & Gugerty (2016) focusing on NGOs operating in Cambodia, found that those NGOs that prioritized *rationalization* (documentation of own performances, extensive monitoring, evaluation) and *professionalization* (e.g. training of staff, hiring of professional staff members) increased their chances of gaining legitimacy and bilateral aid. Appe's (2016) study, revealed similarly that in order to ensure legitimacy and support, the NGO networking sector in Latin America combined elements from managerialism with e.g. accountability measures entailing the dissemination of information through the internet etc.

Social interactions and inclusion of local stakeholders

Downward accountability, *social interactions with and inclusion of local stakeholders* are also tools employed in legitimacy work of local NGOs. According to Jakimow (2010:558), who applied institutional theory in her research about Indian NGOs, NGOs desire local legitimacy as this ensures "access to the field", yet in order to achieve local legitimacy, NGOs need to relate to local people and those norms which may ensure legitimacy. According to Ebrahim (2003:202-206), *downward accountability* can be implemented by e.g. giving local stakeholders "a voice", an opportunity to be heard.

Empirical studies by Leardini et al. (2009), Leonard (2012), and Bertorelli & Brar (2012), which all concluded that the inclusion of stakeholders is a prerequisite for NGO/nonprofit legitimacy, offer a deeper insight into legitimacy work processes of NGOs where local stakeholders are involved. Leonard's (2012) study concluded that NGOs fail to ensure local legitimacy if local and cultural factors are ignored. The NGOs ensured local legitimacy not solely by relying on their own image & qualifications and fulfilling formal criteria (e.g. living up to management criteria, formal policy, and donors' goals), but also by building up trust in the local community via complex social processes. The NGOs strived to understand the local cultural norms, family dynamics and the academic needs of each student. (ibid.). Similar processes are described in Bertorelli & Brar's (2012) study, which examined the collaboration between a large Indian NGO and two Indian states regarding the improvement of public primary education. The NGO utilized a flexible legitimacy strategy which entailed e.g. intense cooperation with their stakeholders, who were the beneficiaries (students), public teachers, local communities, and state governments. The NGO maintained a close physical presence in the operational areas; gave the locals ownership feelings of the NGO projects. Such actions resulted in greater support and commitment from the locals and the public teachers (ibid.). Leardini *et al.*'s study (2009), which utilized institutional perspectives to explore legitimacy work in some Italian nonprofits, revealed similar processes. Asides from identifying, understanding and responding to the needs of the local community, the nonprofits formed a trust and dialogue based relationship with the locals, and allowed local key stakeholders to take part in the strategy planning and leadership. Another central strategy for both gaining and maintaining legitimacy was for the nonprofit to demonstrate its strong local roots by having its board consisting of influential local people, as this ensured that the leadership could "read the needs of the local community" (ibid:525-526).

Demonstration of values, credibility and worthiness

According to NGO literature, *'values'* is a major foundational pillar of NGOs (Cabedo et al. 2008:344), with legitimacy and the relevance of NGOs hinging upon the notion that NGOs should help people in need (see e.g. Atack 1999). Cabedo *et al.* (2009:344) explains that it is thus essential that NGOs clearly formulate their social values, run activities which harmonize with these values, and signal this to their stakeholders. Jakimow (2011:218), who explored links between '*values'* and legitimacy of Indian NGOs through institutional optics, states similarly that legitimacy and survival of NGOs relies on the extent that the NGOs reflect the values and norms of both the NGO sector and the external environments. Jakimow's study found that although many Indian NGOs claim legitimacy by referring to their professionalism and meeting stakeholder's demands, the identity and work practices of Indian NGOs are highly influenced by 'values'. The NGOs had to align their own values with specific norms & values in the Indian society due to e.g. scepticism towards the NGO sector. The NGOs also had to convince local stakeholders that it's work was based on voluntarism and selfless service (ibid.).

Zhou & Ye's (2019) study, which examined - also through institutional perspectives - online fundraising activities of Chinese NGOs, identified a strong correlation between NGOs' chances of gaining funds and NGO's demonstration of e.g. their *credibility, worthiness, and competency*. This study concluded that it is essential to signal e.g. credibility and the worthiness of the causes in a persuasive manner by disseminating "concrete personal stories". Omona & Mukuye's (2012) study revealed that those NGOs in Ghana that were viewed as credible, increased their chances of gaining legitimacy, local support and foreign aid, yet credibility and moral support did not necessarily equate with financial support due to the poverty in the local community. There was also no obvious link between the NGOs' credibility and the quality and efficiency of their services, as the locals backed up their local NGOs as it offered essential services which the government failed to provide them (ibid.).

Non-conventional strategies

NGOs appear to secure legitimacy through different formal and conventional strategies and tools, yet research has also found in line with e.g. Omona & Mukuye (2012) that such methods and legitimacy from stakeholders does not necessarily equate with material support due to different reasons (see e.g.Suarez & Gugerty's 2016). A study by Willner (2019:225, 241) also illustrates that complying with stakeholders' demands, e.g. in terms of adopting managerialism, may actually hamper organizations' opportunity to live up to their mission to properly help their beneficiaries.

When factors in the formal and conventional systems inhibit organizational actions and goals, or when organizational projects are not aligned with formal rules and criteria, NGOs may still be able to conduct their work and gain legitimacy from external stakeholders. A study by e.g. Srivastava (2008), examining privately financed low-fee schools for disadvantaged children in India from institutional optics, found that when factors in the formal network inhibited the educational work, the school owners employed a *shadow institutional framework (*a codified informal set of norms and procedures) to influence and manipulate the official policies and regulatory frameworks in order to ensure ongoing operations. Although this shadow network did not align with official policy framework and regulations, the officials and other audiences accepted these schools due to societal necessity or *perverse incentives* in the formal network. The same study found that these schools also gained legitimacy simply due to the belief that they offered better education than the public schools. A study by Ohara (2012) about unrecognized low-fee private schools in Delhi (India) revealed similarly, that these schools, even those whose actions were not considered proper, gained legitimacy from local officials and other stakeholders e.g. because the stakeholders profited from these schools being run, and because the government officials acknowledged these schools' contributions to the national & global educational goals.

Summary and comments:

This literature review has revealed that legitimacy work is taking place within the NGO sector in the South, and that this legitimacy work may be conducted both upwards towards donors and government agencies, and downwards towards local stakeholders such as the beneficiaries and other local actors. In this context, different conventional and non-conventional strategies and tools may be employed, depending on the given situation, type of stakeholders, NGOs' capacity and skills etc. However, existing research, which is both qualitative and quantitative, often focuses on NGO legitimacy from more general or international optics, or in relation to specific stakeholders or concepts. Although I found some more in-depth qualitative studies about legitimacy work processes where e.g. many different stakeholders are addressed (e.g. Bertorelli & Brar's 2012; Leonard 2012), only few studies distinguished between strategies for gaining and maintaining legitimacy (e.g. Leardini et al. 2009). This leaves a somewhat fragmented empirical impression of NGOs' legitimacy work, also when considering e.g. the limited research about institutional work in developing countries (Martí & Mair 2009:94).

3. Theoretical framework

Theory and theoretical concepts are applied in qualitative research to comprehend and interpret the empirical social world and social interactions (Blumer 1969), and in ethnographic research, it is imperative to employ a coherent theoretical framework in order to avoid fragmented or "stand-alone" research (Denscombe 2014:91). I will in this section introduce the theoretical framework which I will employ to analyze my empirical findings.

As noted, NGO legitimacy is not theorized nor comprehended very well in development literature (Lister 2003:175). Although there is no direct tie between institutional theory and the NGO sector (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019:225), I will predominantly apply institutional perspectives, as it enhances the understanding of organizational behaviour (Greenwood et al. 2012), including how organizations may ensure legitimacy (Garrow & Hasenfeld 2010:50; Alvesson & Spice 2019:200). The prime objective of institutional theory is to comprehend how various institutional factors - cultural, normative and regulative - influence organizations, their behaviour and their fields (Greenwood et al. 2012). I will draw heavily on Suchman (1995), whose work is a continuation of previous institutional theories, since Suchmn has theorized explicitly about strategies for maintaining and protecting legitimacy. Institutional theory has been criticized for putting too much emphasis on the passive approaches of organizations during legitimacy work processes, and for largely ignoring other factors that may influence the legitimacy work processes such as organizational agency and power (see e.g. Lister 2003, Battilana & D'Aunno 2009). Another benefit of drawing on Suchman is that he also portrays organizations as proactive and even manipulative actors.

In order to enhance the understanding of legitimacy work processes, I will draw on various inputs from other theorists. I will employ DiMaggio & Powell (1983) and Meyer & Rowan (1977) to understand how formal NGOs may ensure legitimacy via e.g. conformism in highly institutionalized settings. Lister (2003), Hasenfeld (2010), and Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) have theorized about legitimacy of human service organizations/NGOs from institutional perspectives, and their inputs will be utilized to link institutional theory more directly to the NGO sector. Since Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) have theorized about NGOs in terms of agency and power, I will employ their inputs along with those of e.g. Thompson (2003) and Garrow & Hasenfeld (2010) to clarify what actions NGOs may initiate in order to protect their *agency* during legitimacy work. Elements from resource dependency theory by Pfeffer & Salancik (2003) and organization theory by Weick (1977, 2009) will be included to further enhance the understanding of those actions which NGOs, that rely on external resources, may initiate during legitimacy work. Pfeffer & Salancik and Weick's contributions will be integrated with institutional theory due to the similarities (Pfeffer & Salancik 2003:xiii)

Introduction to Legitimacy work

According to Suchman, there are different reasons as to why organizations desire legitimacy, but legitimacy tends to increase the stability, credibility and coherence of organizational activities, since legitimacy influences outsiders' understanding of and behaviour towards the organizations (ibid:573-576; 586). If organizations appear legitimate, e.g. *worthy, meaningful, predictable or trustworthy*, then external actors will act more positively towards the organizations, something which may empower organizations and increase the likelihood of acquiring external goodwill and resources (ibid:574-575, 586). Organizations can draw on various strategies in their attempt to gain and maintain legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan 1977; Pfeffer & Salancik 1993:196; Suchman 1995), with Suchman (1995) outlining organizational legitimacy work as a cultural process where organizations may resort to a plethora of pragmatic, moral and cognitive techniques in their legitimacy work. According to Suchman (1995:575,586), a fundamental tool is *verbal and non-verbal communication* between the organizations and their audiences in combination with other tools like *collective accounts* and *rational explanations of organizational actions* etc. The importance, efficiency and challenges of organizational legitimacy work, nonetheless, rely on e.g. the specific situation, the cultural context and what types of legitimacies the organization desires or possesses[2]. If external audiences are sceptical towards the organizational activities and/or the organization, the focus of legitimacy work may be on securing legitimacy for both the organizational activities and the organization (ibid:585-586). Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) explain similarly in their article "Non-Governmental Organisations and Legitimacy: Authority, Power and Resources", that in order to ensure legitimacy, NGOs undergo a process where they constantly *"have to justify to others about their right to exist and to act"*, and although their justification to legitimacy may be incorrect, NGOs need to go through this process in order to act and receive external support from stakeholders like donors etc. Legitimacy, however, does not guarantee NGOs access to resources, since the support which NGOs can attract relies on different factors including NGOs' preferences and available external resources (ibid: 242, 246-247).

Legitimacy building strategies

Suchman (1995:585-594) explains that building up legitimacy is a more cumbersome task than protecting legitimacy, since organizations tend to face great obstacles when attempting to obtain legitimacy, e.g. audiences who disagree with the organization's goals or consider its technologies/activities risky or uncertain etc. Legitimacy building work is notably challenging when seeking support from new audiences or "pre-existing legitimate entities" (ibid:585-586), or when introducing activities that are new, different or weakly institutionalized (Suchman 1995; Pfeffer & Salancik 1993:202), since non-legitimate activities are "destined for comments and attacks" etc. (Pfeffer & Salancik 1993:194). Gnes and Vermeulen (2019: 233-235) state that since interactions with different audiences is the "major axis of organisational activity", and because NGOs get various responses from their audiences, NGOs must be constantly cognizant of and respond to external expectations. According to Suchman (1995), complex organizations are typically well-prepared and can cope with legitimacy challenges, since their management is cognizant about the organizational plans and the importance of legitimacy work, and the chances of gaining legitimacy are increased if the legitimacy work is managed very strategically. Organizations thus conduct legitimacy building work on some level, employing both passive and active methods (ibid:585-586). Suchman (1995) categorizes legitimacy building strategies into the following three groups: *Conforming to environments, selection of environments, and*

[2] According to Suchman (1995), organizations can gain or maintain three types of legitimacies: Pragmatic legitimacy, which is based on the self-interest of the organization's audiences/constituents. Moral legitimacy, which is based on the audience's normative approval of the organization. And cognitive legitimacy, which is based on the audience's understanding or view of the organization and its work.

manipulation of environmental structures. The first two categories are most commonly employed, while 'manipulation of environmental structures' is typically only utilized when the other strategies are inadequate (ibid:587-593).

Conforming to environments (passive strategy)

According to Suchman (1995) a convenient and easier legitimacy building tool is the *acceptance of* and *conforming* to demands or ideals of audiences in the external environments, since such approaches pose no threat to existing institutionalized elements. One way of conforming to the demands or ideals of audiences is by offering them decision-making opportunities. Other tools for achieving legitimacy through compliance are for the organizations to simply meet the basic needs of their audiences; to portray themselves as "cultural insiders"; or relying on recognition and their good reputation by e.g. utilizing testimonies from external audiences about the organizations' reliability and character (Suchman 1996).

Organizations may also achieve legitimacy by identifying with socially legitimate goals or institutions, transforming or shaping their actions in accordance with these legitimized institutionalized elements (e.g. Suchman 1995). Lister (2003) explains that it is the stakeholders, who usually set those benchmarks or characteristics that NGOs have to live up to in order to gain legitimacy from the stakeholders. NGO legitimacy is thus determined by the organizations' ability to conform to their stakeholders' mindset, but also to dominant approaches within the development field and preeminent discourses & opinions in the general society, yet the different criteria which NGOs have to meet in order to achieve legitimacy fluctuate in accordance with changes within the development field and the normative and cognitive opinions in society etc. (ibid:179, 182,188). In order to gain legitimacy, organizations may *mimic isomorphism* or change their own mindset and key mission statements as a way of signalling alignment with audiences' ideals, although these actions are no prerequisites for gaining legitimacy (Suchman 1995). *Isomorphism* refers to a process where organizations incorporate institutional rules or undergo organizational change so they become similar to their counterparts (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Meyer & Rowan 1977). DeMaggio & Powell (1983) specify that organizations undergo isomorphism as this may e.g. enhance their own legitimacy, since homogenous organizations from the same field tend to experience improved reputation etc., and because isomorphism makes it easier for organizations to meet the formal administrative criteria that are required for receiving public and private funding etc. (DiMaggio & Powell 1983). Even though isomorphism may not bolster organizational efficiency, organizations are inclined to copy or imitate counterparts which are perceived as more legitimate or successful, imitating or adopting various elements such as formal bureaucratic structures and procedures, policies, culture, operating procedures, accounting practices, performance criterias etc. (DiMaggio & Powell 1983:147-153).

Lister (2003) explains, that NGO theorists tend to link NGO legitimacy to technical factors such as demonstration of correct organizational structure and technical procedures, where NGOs are believed to gain legitimacy if they fulfill a mix of the following technical criteria: accountability, representativeness or performance (Lister 2003:177, 189). Meyer & Rowan (1977) explains that many organizations "ceremoniously" adopt external institutional rules and elements (e.g. programs, technologies, procedures and practices), since such actions stabilize the organization and increase their chances of gaining legitimacy. If, for example, the organizations take in institutional elements that have great societal value, e.g. prestigious/new expertise or professional consultants, then the organizations may be viewed more positively, and it will be easier to attract loans, donations etc. Meyer & Rowan (1977:304,351) explain that the adopted institutional elements function as *myths* which organizations base their legitimacy on, since simply the act of incorporating externally accepted rules and elements, regardless of their actual effect, tend to increase organizational legitimacy and survival. However, it is also necessary to signal that these myths work (ibid:356).

Selection of environments & Manipulation (active strategies)

According to e.g. Suchman (1995), organizations may also gain legitimacy by avoiding conformism and instead utilize more *proactive measures*, since organizations, including NGOs, are not solely compliant in relation to their external audiences/stakeholders due to their inherent nature (Suchman 1995; Gnes & Vermeulen 2019). Weick (1977) outlines organizations as very complex actors that contain and exhibit various dichotomous attributes and behaviors such as adaptability; flexibility; effectiveness; grouchiness; superstitiousness; and ineffectiveness. Although organizations strive to make sense, they can contain opposite or contradictory characteristics, being for example both susceptible and critical towards external influences (ibid.). Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) explain that NGOs are fully aware that they hold this dual characteristics, and that NGOs can be very strategic and scrutinizing, being even able to critically handpick their stakeholders/audiences, although this depends on various factors such as organizational goals or ideologies, and what kind of resources the audiences can offer them. Suchman (1995) details that organizations can build up legitimacy by e.g. selecting specific environments, audiences or resource suppliers that are more positively inclined towards the organization and/or who offer support without many counterclaims. Organizations can also gain legitimacy by selecting environments or stakeholders that require that the organizations get certified or fulfill very formal or specific criterias. In this context organizations may adjust their own goal statements & accounts in order to get access to desired environments and support (ibid.). Suchman (1995) explains that in case organizations face externally rooted conflicts and constraints, the organizations can cope by e.g. *segregating environments or prioritizing specific components* in the environment at the expense of others, while simultaneously *signalling organizational legitimacy* (Suchman 1995).

Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) explain that NGOs can also be very manipulative in their interactions with their audiences, and according to Suchman (1995), organizations can likewise build up legitimacy by *manipulating existing environments or creating new ones*. Such strategies are employed by e.g. innovative organizations that introduce new activities (ibid.), since non-institutionalized innovations may decrease legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan 1977:353). In order to convince audiences/stakeholders to support their work, organizations can for example communicate very strategically with their audiences/stakeholders by utilizing 'legitimate rational accounts' with emotional appeal (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019). Suchman (1995) explains that organizations can also *construct or declare new myths or explanations of social reality* by resorting to different techniques such as strategic communication, articulation of accounts about the organizational work and lobbying or advertising.

Legitimacy maintaining strategies

According to Gnes & Vermeulen (2019:239), legitimacy maintaining work is an easier task than legitimacy building work, since it is easier to protect gained legitimacy. Suchman (1995) and Hasenfeld (201) point out, though, that most organizations also need to focus on legitimacy maintenance, since different factors may jeopardize gained legitimacy. If organizations for example take their legitimacy for granted, ignore problems extensively or experience quick accumulation of organizational problems and challenges, gained legitimacy may be at risk, and same can occur if organizations are inflexible or have undergone isomorphism, as it may be difficult in such situations to detect external changes or shifting demands that may threat their legitimacy (Suchman: 593-594). The task of maintaining legitimacy can be demanding due to e.g. organizational failures, competition from other organizations, external shocks and anomalies etc. It is especially difficult to maintain legitimacy if the organizations' external environments are fragmented and very heterogeneous, as it can be difficult to satisfy and take into account all elements in non-homogenous milieus (Suchman 1995:585-586, 593-594; Hasenfeld 2010). Suchman (1995) categorizes legitimacy protecting strategies into the following two categories: *Perceiving future changes. Protecting past accomplishments.*

Perceiving future changes

Suchman (1995) states that organizations can maintain legitimacy by being alert and cognizant about future problems and external demands, that may pose legitimacy risk in the future, in order to mitigate the escalation of such problems so they do not turn into actual legitimacy crises. Pfeffer & Salancik (1993:194-195, 202) point out that values can change in society, where even the definition of legitimacy is undoubtedly evolving and changing through times, and organizations therefore need to be alert about these external changes as this gives them the opportunity to make e.g. 'new justifications to legitimacy'.

The tools for maintaining legitimacy by perceiving future changes can range from conforming to manipulative depending on what type of external demands and problems the organizations are confronted with (Suchman 1995). The organization's management, or staff members acting like middlemen, may scrutinize and oversee external development and their audiences, and seek cultural insights about their audiences' reactions, values and beliefs. The organizations may even allow its audiences or stakeholders to permeate the decision making processes of the organizations, solely with the intention of scrutinizing them (Suchman 1995). When having detected possible challenges or changes in external environments, e.g. changes in values, the organizations may e.g. make alterations to their goals as a way of signalling to outsiders that the organizations are flexible and supportive of new ideas etc. However, in case the organizations manipulate with the social definition of legitimacy in order to maintain support, this endeavour can only succeed if the organizations argue convincingly to outsiders that the organizational actions are "just and worthy" (Pfeffer & Salancik 1993:194-195, 202).

Protecting past accomplishments

According to institutional theory, organizations can also safeguard legitimacy by drawing on and referring to their previous accomplishments (Suchman 1995). Organizations can stockpile external goodwill and support from their audiences, which can then by utilized as leverage in critical moments, e.g. when organizations experience conflicts and dilemmas in highly institutional settings that are related to their stakeholders, such as situations when the organizations are facing pressure from their stakeholders such as the public or the elite (ibid.). Suchman (1995) explains that organizations in this context may draw on stockpiled *cognitive legitimacy,* which is a highly desired legitimacy, but very difficult to obtain. This type of legitimacy refers to external support which is based on meaningful cultural/cognitive accounts about the organization and its activities, e.g. the notion that the organizational actions are meaningful, necessary or inevitable, or that there are no alternatives to the organizational activities or services. If these cultural/cognitive accounts harmonize well with audiences' daily life experiences and "larger belief systems", then the organization will be taken for granted and its work will be viewed as legitimate. Organizations can stockpile cognitive legitimacy via close communication and intense interactions with its social surroundings, and by solving issues emerging during this process (ibid.).

Theory on protecting organizational agency

Institutional theory has been criticized for emphasizing too much on organization's compliance and conformism during legitimacy work processes (e.g. Lister 2003), yet, Weick (1977) outlines organizations as complex actors that possess different and dichotomous characteristics that can stabilize and streamline organizations (ibid). According to Battilana & D'Aunno (2009:45-47), organizations possess *agency during* challenges, dilemmas, and ambiguities, and Weick (2009:21) specifies accordingly, that complex organizations are able to handle external uncertainties, since they possess *adaptability* and an *"extensive response repertoire"*. In recent decades there has within institutional and related organizational theory been an growing focus on *agency* of organizations and the role of organizational managements (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2009:3), and organizational theorists have in this context suggested different strategies and tools, which organizations can employ to protect their agency.

As institutional theory has implied, human service organizations in very heterogeneous societies are especially challenged in their agency when conducting their work, as it can be very difficult to respond to all uncertainties in this context (e.g. Suchman 1995, Hasenfeld 2010), e.g. in situations where human service organizations face conflicting or very pressurizing demands from their stakeholders. Meyer & Rowan (1977:38-40) explain that when organizations face conflicting or inconsistent external demands in highly institutional settings, they can draw on different tools in order to appear useful; carry on their work; and to preserve their formal organizational structures. These tools bear resemblance to those that e.g. Suchman (1995) suggests in terms of legitimacy work. Organizations can e.g. rely on more passive approaches like displaying *logic of confidence and good faith,* which implies that the organization acts in good faith; displays an "an aura of confidence"; signals to outsiders that the organization performs its roles/job properly (e.g. via professionalization); and "maintains face" despite organizational insufficiencies or challenges (Meyer & Rowan 1977:38-40) .

Organizations can also, as previously noted, employ more proactive methods in order to protect their agency. Thompson (2003:4-13), whose theory is a predecessor to institutional theory, states that it is vital for complex organization to employ both *open system strategies and closed system strategies* as a way of coping with uncertainties and secure organizational goals and survival, meaning that organizations need to form interdependent relationships with external actors (open system), and reject certain external influences by embracing e.g. those elements that contribute positively to the organizational goals (closed system), as this creates internal stability and predictability which organizations also need in order to carry out their work. Lynn (2005) specifies similarly, that although organizations must respond to external influences, they also need to regulate or reduce external influence in order to secure efficient operations and mitigate uncertainties, and this is achieved by e.g. *buffering,* which entails that organizational actors protect different parts of their organization or its work from specific external influences, while simultaneously letting some elements of the organization, e.g. the management, be influenced by external institutions.

As noted earlier, 'power' is not a very prevalent concept in institutional theory, however, the role of 'power' is something that e.g. Gnes & Vermeulen (2019), Garrow & Hasenfeld (2010) and Sorin (2010) bring up in connection with their institutional theorization on human service organizations. Foucault (1975) states that *power* is an omnipresent pervasive societal phenomena, and Collins (1992) specifies that actors, who desire social change, are normally involved in processes that involve power. Sorin (2010:381, 395) explains accordingly, that even though human service organizations are strongly influenced or controlled by their stakeholders/audiences, local organizations and their staff usually possess autonomy and power to some degree or another in relation to their clients, services or rigid/unfair regulations. Power of human service organizations is usually expressed when organizations have the authority to make decisions (ibid.). Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) nuance the understanding of NGO legitimacy in relation to organizational agency by pointing out, that although NGOs' structures and activities are influenced by outside factors, NGOs not only conduct legitimacy work in order to legitimate themselves, but also to achieve e.g. their political objectives and to reduce the power of external actors. NGOs can *employ their gained legitimacy,* along with their *credibility and moral authority,* to gain *power* for themselves, which may then be strategically employed by the NGOs, not solely to gain additional resources (e.g. financial aid), but also as an instrument to gain political influence and power over more affluent private and public actors (ibid.). According to Pfeffer & Salancik (1993:196), organizations can even possess the power to *change the actual social definitions of legitimacy,* so it benefits their own goals and operations. Garrow & Hasenfeld (2010:43) explain that it is especially conducive for human service organizations, that lack *cognitive legitimacy*, to implement power when desiring institutional change. In this context the organizations can employ e.g. political advocacy in their attempt to achieve "new logics" (Garrow & Hasenfeld 2010:43, referencing also Lawrence & Suddaby 2006).

Summary and reflections

According to the theoretical framework I have chosen to apply, local developing NGOs can draw on a plethora of strategies and tools ranging from conforming to manipulative as part of their legitimacy work. From institutional and related organizational optics, underpinnings to legitimacy of developing NGOs and their work not only rests on technical factors, but also non-technical factors. Although NGOs may face stakeholders' demands and other uncertainties that may challenge their legitimacy work and *agency*, NGOs, due to their inherent nature and skills, may be able to protect their agency by drawing on different tools, including 'power'.

As noted, I have chosen to predominantly apply institutional theory. Institutional theory, however, has its drawbacks and limitations (Lister 2003:84; Meyer & Höllerer 2014; Alvesson & Spicer 2019), with critics noting that differences and nuances of organizational life risk getting ignored through these optics due to its heavy focus on organizational similarities and isomorphism (Greenwood *et al.*2014:1207; Arvidson 2018). Yet, according to NGO theorists, institutional theory is useful for grasping the complexity and nuances of NGO legitimacy (Lister 2003:189, Gnes & Vermeulen 2019), as referring solely to technical criterias when analyzing NGO legitimacy will produce an incomplete understanding (Lister 2003:189). Institutional theory can also clarify how NGOs endure with few means, establish themselves and bolster their position, and how they can gain political influence & power (Gnes & Vermeulen (2019).

4. Methodology

I will account for my scientific position and then my research procedure. I will also give an overall presentation of my case, the Indian NGO ”Sangathan” (This NGO name is fictional. The real name is anonomymized due to ethical reasons. ”Sangathan” is the Hindi word for organization). This chapter also contains my ethical considerations and reflections about my study's trustworthiness and credibility.

Scientific standpoint: epistemological and ontological considerations

In this study, my scientific standpoint will be based on *interpretivism,* which entails that researchers strive to understand the subjective meaning of social actions and social actors' behaviour and institutions (Bryman 2004:13). I will take on a social constructivist and qualitative approach. Social constructivism entails the notion that knowledge is not a final reflection of reality, but a discursive and subjective construction influenced by social, cultural and historical factors that may transform during the course of time and space. From this perspective, truths or falsehoods are not fixed but continuously defined by different *knowledge regimes* (Phillips 1995:300), and social phenomena are articulated and constructed via available discourses and interpretations (Tanggaard & Brinkman 2015:31).

A number of studies about 'NGO legitimacy' do so through quantitative optics with emphasis on e.g. identifying statistical correlation between variables (Silverman 2006:34). I have chosen to utilize qualitative methods in order to answer my research questions, since these methods enable researchers to understand social phenomena (Silverman 2006:56) through the exploration and illumination of societal concepts (e.g. social interactions and processes), something which is not achievable through quantitative methods (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2015:13, 24-25). From a qualitative perspective, data is produced, exhibited and conveyed through the researcher's actions (Tangaard & Brinkmann 2015:536). Qualitative research can e.g. reveal how NGO legitimacy work is established and locally constituted (Silverman 2006:44), and what effect societal phenomena, including organizations and organizational problems, have on societal actors (Rennstam & Wästerfors 2015:13, 24-25). Qualitative methods enable the researcher to understand/interpret/describe individual and collective experience, and to ascertain *how* a social phenomena like NGO legitimacy work is implemented and experienced (Brinkmann & Tanggard 2015:13-14).

Research approach

I will conduct ethnographic research, since this qualitative method is especially suitable when exploring complex social phenomena, processes and relationships in natural everyday settings (Denscombe 2014:57,90; Atkinson 2015:14,22), and how actors in specific cultures experience social phenomena (Denscombe 2014:57, 90). This approach correlates with my scientific standpoint and the purpose of my study, namely to explore legitimacy work of the local NGO sector in the South from institutional and social constructivist perspectives.

As previously noted, NGO legitimacy is poorly understood within developing research (Lister 2003), and I will employ case study as this approach can yield new information and in-depth and detailed descriptions of social phenomena by *"[delving] deep into the intricacies of the situation in order to describe things in detail"* (Denscombe 2014:57). Aside from being a suitable research tool for small-scale studies (Denscombe 2014:63), case study also enables the researcher to single-handedly and with few means and within short time to collect detailed information about a given social phenomena (Denscombe 2014). Multiple methods are permitted in ethnographic research (Atkinson 2015), and it is recommended to employ several methods and different information sources in order *"to capture the complex reality under scrutiny"* (Denscombe 2014:63). The most common ethnographic method is field work (Atkinson 2015:12,25,56), which I have chosen to apply. I will employ qualitative interviews, observations and analysis of documents and other data such as photos and online information. My initial plan was to conduct a multiple case study, but I ended up with a single case due to circumstances that I will specify later. A single case study has its benefits, as it enables researchers to concentrate on specific phenomena and reveal details that could not be illuminated through multi-case studies or other types of research (Denscombe 2010: 54-55).

Initial research stage

I decided early on in the research phase to conduct my fieldwork in India due to a keen interest in the Indian NGO sector, but also practical reasons. I have previously visited India, not only as a tourist, but also as a volunteer in NGOs and in connection with my previous studies in international social work. I found it convenient to return to India, as I hoped that my previous experiences there and with the NGO sector would simplify the process of "getting access to the field". In order to carry out ethnographic research as planned, it is vital to get hold of necessary data sources such as people, places and documents, but achieving this can be very challenging, and lack of access to information may seriously inhibit the research (Denscombe 2014:5, 64,84). I chose not to contact any NGOs prior to my journey to India, as I have previously experienced that it can be a slow and cumbersome process to establish contact with Indian NGOs solely through mail. Instead I searched the internet for NGOs, which I could contact upon my arrival in India through mail and personal contact.

Sampling and getting access to the field

Cases in ethnographic research are usually not randomly selected, but chosen deliberately by the researcher on the basis of specific criteria or distinct characteristics (e.g. typical or extreme cases), although *convenience* is often a deciding factor due to *"the realities of the practical world of research with its limits to time and resources"* (Denscombe 2014:58-59). I employed purposive sampling, meaning that I chose NGOs relevant to my research subject (Bryman 2004:333-334). As I wished to study legitimacy work of local developing NGOs positioned in a complex aid- and ecosystem, with focus on legitimacy building and maintaining strategies, I had the following criteria: The NGOs had to be fully established with a longer track-history, have external stakeholders, and receive external funding, preferably also foreign funding.

Getting access to the field is fundamental in ethnographic research (Eberle & Maeder 2016:125), but achieving access to private settings like NGOs is one of the most challenging tasks during the research process (Bryman 2004:294). I spent the first period in India attempting to "get access to the field" by contacting different local NGOs primarily via the NGOs' official mail. In my mail I informed the NGOs that I had just arrived in India and that I was interested to get in touch with them as soon as possible in connection with my research. I then waited for responses, but with a plan to personally contact some of these NGOs in case I did not hear from them, a research strategy I had successfully employed during my previous field visit in India. In case I did not get an opportunity to conduct interviews/field work during my stay in India "due to the practical world of research" (Denscombe 2014:59), my plan was to establish contacts with some NGOs in the hope of long-distance collaboration. Getting 'access to the field' was challenging for me in the beginning (Denscombe 2014). I contacted, for example, a big NGO personally during my first week in India, and a key staff member asked me to send the organization an email with further details, but I never heard back from this NGO. By week two I got a response from a small NGO, which invited me to their field office. I visited this NGO, where I conducted a short interview with one of the founders and the project coordinator, but unfortunately this NGO did not have time to collaborate with me. However, during the same week, I got a positive email response from a key staff member of the local NGO Sangathan, who expressed interest to meet me.

In the beginning of my last week in India, I visited Sangathan's branch office where I talked to the staff member, who had initially responded to my email and who turned out to be *the gatekeeper,* who could grant me access to the field (Denscombe 2014:85). Getting in touch with and negotiating with gatekeepers, who can grant permission to interviews and access to locations and documents, is often key factor in ethnographic fieldwork (Denscombe 2014:85), and during my first visit at Sangathan, I introduced myself and explained about the purpose of my research, and I also handed over a confirmation letter from my supervisor at Lund University in order to establish trust and hopefully "access to the field". After I was shown a presentation film about Sangathan's work, I conducted a preliminary interview with *the gatekeeper* who had worked for the organization for many years and had deep insight into the projects and funding sources. During this interview I was informed about the educational projects for underprivileged children, stakeholders and funders etc. I was also informed by *the gatekeeper,* that Sangathan was keen on collaborating with me in connection with my field work and data gathering process, and a detailed field visit plan was laid out for the remainder of my week in India, consisting of visits to Sangathan's head office and private school, and to a couple of non-formal rehabilitation centers for children in suburban areas. I was granted formal interviews with the gatekeeper himself and four other key staff members of Sangathan, including the director.

Due to the great willingness of Sangathan to cooperate with me in terms of interviews, field visits and document access, and the organization's active presence on the internet, I was convinced that a single-case study was the right methodological approach.

Overall presentation of Sangathan

Sangathan is a local developing NGO, which runs different aid- and development projects in rural and suburban areas in India, with its main beneficiaries being poor and underprivileged grown-ups and children. Presently the projects are heavily funded by external donors (government agencies, private donors from India and abroad, online donor platforms, foreign agencies etc.). Sangathan's work is far ranging with focus on e.g. basic service provision; education and rehabilitation; livelihood; health and nutrition; womens' empowerment; and humanitarian and disaster response. Sangathan runs different projects targeted children, e.g. a residential home for boys at risk of becoming child labourers; non-formal rehabilitation centers with focus on mainstreaming poor children into the formal school system; and a government recognized unaided private primary school for underprivileged children that also functions as a model school. My field work concentrated on Sangathan's childrens' rehabilitation centers and its primary school projects (model school and collaboration with public schools).

Sangathan has many different stakeholders. According to my informants, the stakeholders linked to the educational projects for the children are mainly the following actors: The recipients (children); parents/guardians; funders/donors (Indian and foreign organizations or individuals, online donor platforms); volunteers, public school teachers; local community members e.g. local school boards and panchayats (local government); government school officials; the state government; and the central Indian government. See table 1.

The interview process

During my fieldwork, I conducted some formal flexible semi-structured interviews with the purpose to get my informants to contribute with *in-depth real life information*, as in-depth interviews enables the researcher to study the social world from the informants' perspective (Miller & Glassner 2016:54-56; Bryman 2004:319). Yet, I am aware that social interactions occur during the interview process, and that information retrieved from these interviews will thus be socially constructed (Tanggaard & Brinkman 1995:31) and "fractures of stories" and not complete pictures due to different factors such as the wrong interview questions being asked due to the researchers' lack of insider knowledge etc. (Miller & Glassner 2016:54-56)

Organizations typically regulate access and membership carefully (Eberle & Maeder 2016:125), and in ethnographic research, the so-called *gatekeepers* typically heavily influence the researcher's access to informants and information (Denscombe 2014:85). This was also the case during my research, in the sense that the gatekeeper at Sangathan, who was also one of my informants, "dictated" which other informants from the organization I could interview. This experience aligns with Bryman (2004:304) who states: *"The sampling of informants in ethnographic research is often a combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Much of the time ethnographers are forced to gather information from whatever sources are available to them".* The question is how this may have affected my empirical research (Denscombe 2014; Bryman 2004:304). I did, however, not mind interviewing those informants that were assigned to me, since they were key staff members who seemed relevant interviewing as their different job functions could contribute with different perspectives and experiences, something which is essential in ethnographic research (Bryman 2004:304). However, it is plausible that my informants may not (always) have been fully honest with me, maybe intentionally holding back specific information during the interviews (Bryman 2004:338), maybe due to the sensitivity of my research subject/questions or worries over that full honesty would place themselves or their organization in a less flattering light. It is conceivable that my informants may have left out information about e.g. corrupt practices or actions not aligned with conventional norms and standards, which means that I may not have gotten a complete picture of Sangathan's legitimacy work and practices.

In preparation for my field work and interviews, I devised beforehand a list of preliminary interview questions with different open and closed questions related to my subject matter, and whose purpose was to produce relevant empirical data for my analysis (Denscombe 2014:166). I was mindful of employing open questions, since answers to these types of questions will *"likely reflect the full richness and complexity of the views held by the respondent"* (Denscombe 2014:176). However, during my field visit, my approach to my interview questions was reflexive and flexible, in the sense that I ongoingly made adjustments like adding, nuancing, omitting or "cherry-picking" questions prior or during the interviews (Bryman 2004:320-332), depending on what type of information my informants could provide.

Aside from the preliminary interview with the gatekeeper, I conducted seven formal interviews with the following five staff members: The general secretary (DIR); head of resource mobilization & external relations (HRE); a programme officer (PO), a coordinator of educational projects (CEP); and the school director of Sangathan's model primary school (SD). The interviews took place in Sangathan's branch office and at the headquarters in the period 29th of July - 4th of August 2019. The formal interviews lasted between 30 minutes up to approximately 90 minutes each, but most of the interviews were lengthy, lasting more than 45 minutes. All but two interviews were audio recorded, and during or after the non-recorded interviews I took notes on my laptop. I also had some non-formal talks with two informants during my field visits. All interviews were conducted in English. After my field work, I transcribed the recorded interviews in full-length, a time consuming task due to the length of the interviews and the dialect of some of my informants which posed some challenges during the transcribing process. Overall the transcription went relatively smooth due to the good sound quality of my recordings. I emphasized transcribing the interviews very accurately, although I sometimes took the liberty to paraphrase and make other language corrections in order to enhance the comprehension or reading experience (Bryman 2004).

Observations and documents

During my field work, I also conducted some observations “in natural settings”, another classical tool in ethnographic research (Eberle & Maeder 2016:122; Denscombe 2014:205). I did some observations at Sangathan’s field office, at the head office and surrounding areas in the countryside, and at two non-formal education centers in the suburban areas. I took field notes and photographed for example some framed certificates hanging on Sangathan’s office walls. I also conducted online observations (Eberle & Maeder 2016:173), since the internet can also provide relevant ethnographic data (Markham & Stavrova 2016:231). I conducted online observations at Sangathan’s official homepage and social media profiles, and on an online donor platform which Sangathan is affiliated with. I observed texts and visual images. The online observations were conducted from July 2019 up to May 2021. During this process, I took notes and took screenshots (Denscombe 2014:237).

I chose to include documents in my research, since *the gatekeeper* permitted me access to different documents in English related to Sangathan’s projects, and because documents can provide valuable information (Prior 2016:172-173). Documents in social research can be varied, ranging from plain text (reports, mission statements etc.) to internet homepages/social media profiles (ibid), and I collected different kinds of documents that were primarily related to Sangathan’s educational projects. During my field visits I was handed e.g. the organization’s yearly report and progress reports to donors of e.g. the educational projects. Two informants also sent me some electronic documents via mail (e.g. copy of project proposal to foreign donors). I collected information (e.g. strategy reports) from Sangathan’s homepage, as homepages *“can be treated as documents in their own rights”* (Denscombe 2014:228). See appendix for further details over collected documents/data. I am aware that the documents I received or collected from Sangathan, just like the interviews, only offer a partial picture of Sangathan’s legitimacy work and actions, e.g. because the organization has control over the information on its homepage and social media profiles (Markham & Stavrova 2016:230).

Analysis of empirical data sets

There are various approaches to analyze empirical qualitative data (Denscombe 2014:244; Rennstam & Wästerfors 2015:27), but I have employed *thematic analysis,* which does not have a very stringent guideline, but the process is characterized by the researcher moving “from the particular to the abstract” (Rapley 2016:332). *Thematic analysis* roughly entails that the researcher first explores and reviews the collected data sets thoroughly, and then codes the different information. *Coding* refers to that phase, where the researcher constantly labels, gathers and organizes components in the data sets which are deemed relevant or interesting in relation to one's research subject. The generated codes are placed into different thematic categories, and in this context the researcher may draw on mind maps and diagrams. Then the researcher may go through a process where codes and themes are continuously adjusted and analyzed in order to identify complexities, possible connections between themes etc. (Rapley 2016:333; Bryman 2004:402). My analysis process was conducted in similar fashion.

During the initial analysis phase I printed out all the transcribed interviews and read them diligently, noting down relevant codes and potential themes. In preparation for the next analysis phase, I collected all of the remaining data I had so far gathered in order to get an overview over my empirical data. My collected qualitative data produced a large volume of information (Bryman 2004:415), and after I had made an overview, I started to familiarize myself with the different data sets via new rounds of qualitative exploration and probing, identifying codes and themes. There are many different ways to analyze documents (Prior 2016:174), but I approached the analysis of my observations/field notes and documents in the same way as I did with my transcribed interviews. During this analysis stage, I found it very helpful to employ diagrams and mind-mapping. Then I gradually initiated the writing process in terms of analysis. My analysis and data collection phases were not stringent, but reflexive and flexible in the sense that I continued looking for data during the analysis- and writing process.

Ethical considerations

Social researchers must follow good practices and ethical guidelines such as conducting "open and honest research" (Denscombe 2014:307,312), and this especially applies in ethnography (Ryen 2016:31-33), with a social constructivist perspectives (Brinkmann 2015:472), since these research approaches put great emphasis on subjective and socially constructed 'dimensions of social reality' (ibid:472). In this context, it is essential to effectuate *reflexivity* (Brinkmann 2015:478), which means that I, the researcher, takes a critical research stance where I am cognizant of weaknesses in my research and my influence on the research process (Buscatto 2016:148). Although ethnographic researchers should strive for detachment simultaneously with involvement (ibid:140), total neutrality is not achievable e.g. because the interviewer and informants influence each other during qualitative interviews, and because the researcher's actions and interpretations may be influenced by his/her preconceptions; social & cultural background etc. (Atkinson 2015:26-27, Brinkman 2015:476-478).

Ethical consideration must permeate the whole research process (Johansson & Öberg 2008:81), and in interviews it is essential to get the informants' consent, ensuring confidentiality, and avoiding that the informants feel distressed (Brinkmann 2015:472). As it was the *gatekeeper* at Sangathan, who controlled which informants I could interview and set up the interviews, it was not necessary with formal consent forms (see Denscombe 2014:312), although it is ethically correct to inform the participants about the research (Bryman 2004:511). Although none of my informants gave the impression that they felt uncomfortable participating in the interviews, I strived for them to feel comfortable and to talk freely to me. Yet, different factors may influence qualitative interviews such as informants' hesitancy to share sufficient information with the researcher (Miller & Glasner 2016:54-56), and due to ethical reasons, but also to establish trust and cooperation, I introduced myself at the beginning of each interview and specified my background and the purpose of my research (Bryman 2004:511). I told my informants that their names would not be revealed. Since most face-to-face informants feel inhibited by being audio-recorded (Denscombe 2014:196), I asked for my informants' consent to audiorecord, respected the wish of one of my informants not to be audio recorded, and informed those who asked that the audio recordings would not be handed over to anybody.

I have strived to be very cognizant of those solutions the methodological literature suggests to ensure transparent research and to resolve/dampen possible ethical issues, contamination and bias, e.g. conducting rigorous and explorative research (see e.g. Denscombe 2014:61-64; Tanggard & Brinkman 2015:530); handling the collected data in an honest and unbiased way; avoiding data manipulation (Denscombe 2014:324). During the transcriptions of my interviews I was cognizant of avoiding manipulation by e.g. preserving the original meanings and expressions during language corrections.

Trustworthiness/credibility

There are different methodological opinions on how to assess qualitative studies (Bryman 2004:273; Flyvbjerg 2015), including case studies (Denscombe 2014). According to Denscombe (2014:62), single-case studies *"need to be regarded as ends in themselves, finished products whose findings have some value in their own right"*, yet findings from case studies should not be considered as absolute knowledge, but as temporary information part of a continuous process (ibid:61-64). Case studies can generate context based reliable information (Flyvbjerg 2015:498-501), which can be applied more generally to other cases or contexts (Bryman 2004:51, Denscombe 2014:54, Flyvbjerg 2015:518, Atkinson 2015:36; Peräkylä 2016:420-421). Qualitative studies, however, need to be assessed from different benchmarks than those of quantitative studies (Bryman 2004:273, Denscombe 2014), as there are no "absolute truths about the social world" (Bryman 2014:274, referencing Lincoln & Guba 1984, 1994). Methodologists suggest employing e.g. *Lincoln & Guba's trustworthiness criteria* when judging qualitative research, such as the criteria 'credibility', 'transferability', and 'confirmability' (Bryman 2004; Denscombe 2014). *Credibility* implies that the researcher can demonstrate that his/her data is "reasonably likely to be accurate and appropriate" and produced in line with good practice e.g. that the researcher's conclusions are grounded in fieldwork, empirical data, rigorous scrutiny, observations etc. (Denscombe 2014:297-298, referencing Lincoln & Guba 1985). *Transferability* implies the notion that results from qualitative studies can not be automatically generalized to other settings, thus the researcher should strive for "thick descriptions", so others can judge for themselves whether the researcher's findings are transferable to other settings (Bryman 2004:275, referencing e.g. Geertz 1973a and Guba & Lincoln 1985). *Confirmability* implies that although full objectivity is not achievable, the researcher should be e.g. *reflexive*, non-judgemental, and explain to others how one's personal experiences and social background may influence the research (Denscombe 2004:300).

I have e.g. collected data from various sources in order to get rich data, and I audio-recorded interviews and fully transcribed them, as this can document my empirical findings and objectivity etc. (Bryman 2004:330). My empirical findings are related to theory and existing literature/research, and interview excerpts and other empirical findings are inserted in the text, so the reader can judge if my analysis, interpretations and conclusions are "*reasonably likely to be accurate and appropriate"* (Denscombe 2014:297). I have reflected over how e.g. my preconceptions, cultural background and prior experiences may have influenced this study. However, there is always risk of contamination and bias during ethnographic research due to social interactions taking place during qualitative interviews etc. (Holstein & Gubrium 2016:68). Information from my interviews, for example, may signal that the leadership and staff members of Sangathan are (very) cognizant of NGO legitimacy and legitimacy work, but it is conceivable that my informants' answers and reflections may have been heavily influenced by my question techniques etc. (Holstein & Gubrium 2016:68-73; Buscatto 2016:148). Taking into consideration such factors, and that developing NGOs and their fields may vary a lot (Lewis & Kanji 2009), the question is whether the results from a local Indian NGO in a very heterogeneous society (India), is in any way representative for other local developing NGOs. Possible solutions could be to e.g. conduct field work over a longer period of time in different NGOs and areas, with intense observations, as this gives opportunity to examine if there is coherence between information yielded from e.g. formal interviews and actual NGO practices, since *"there can be gap between what people say they do and their actual behaviour"* (Bryman 204:166-167).

5. Analysis

The purpose of this chapter is to answer my research questions, and this will be effectuated by conducting analysis of my collected empirical material with the help of theory and literature from the previous chapter. My empirical findings are integrated with the analysis, which consists of three parts. In the first part, I will thematically explore what strategies appear to be employed in order to gain legitimacy from external stakeholders/audiences. In the second part I will explore strategies utilized in order to protect gained legitimacy. In the third part, I will analyze actions undertaken to protect NGO *agency* during legitimacy work processes.

Institutional/organizational theory implies that local developing NGOs in the South must conduct legitimacy work ongoingly due to external uncertainties (Suchman 1995; Hasenfeld 2010; Gnees & Vermeulen 2019), and in line with this and existing literature, my empirical material suggests that Sangathan's faces different uncertainties when conducting legitimacy work in connection with their educational work for children, and that a variety of strategies are utilized in this context in order to ensure legitimacy (Hasenfeld 2010, Suchman 1995). The legitimacy work of Sangathan appears multifaceted (Lister 2003), e.g. due to their many stakeholders, and I have for analytical and practical purposes constructed a table over legitimacy strategies identified during my analysis. These strategies are categorized with help from theory and concepts from the previous theory chapter and existing literature, and I will regularly refer back to this table during the analysis phases (see table 1 below).

Table 1: Sangathan´s legitimacy strategies in regard do educational work for children

	Type of stakeholders	Purpose of legitimacy strategies (example)	Type of strategies for gaining legitimacy	Type of strategies for protecting legitimacy	TOOL BOX (examples) Practical tools utilized to ensure legitimacy/support from different audiences	Approach of legitimacy work
I	**Donors (foreign & local donors, including local government funders)**	Funding for educational projects	- Conforming to environments - Selection of environments	- Perceiving future changes - Protecting past accomplishments	-Conforming to external demands & existing cultural ideals/norms/values (isomorphism, signalling transparency, conducting upward accountability measures, reporting results and progress) -Selecting stakeholders who are fully cooperative or share same visions & values as Sangathan. - Employing power and moral authority, signalling being "a cultural insider"	Passive & active Directly Proactive
II	**Children/ students (beneficiaries)**	-Children attend/ complete primary school -Good quality education	- Conforming to environments	- Perceiving future changes	-Meeting basic needs (education, school materials etc.) Rational accounts/motivation/convincing -Holistic approach, taking into consideration each child's needs and skills	Active Directly Indirectly Discreetly
III	**Parents/ guardians (local stakeholders)**	- Parents send their children to school. -Engagement & empowerment of parents	- Conforming to environments - Manipulation of environmental structures	-Perceiving future changes - Protecting past accomplishments - Stockpiling of goodwill/support	-Cooperation, intense mutual communication, motivational work, home visits, regular meetings. - Inclusion, giving the parents 'a voice' and ownership feeling, making them part of the planning process. -Convincing via e.g. rational accounts and "new myths or explanations of social reality". - Attentiveness to cultural elements and audience's reactions, values, and beliefs. -Maintaining close contact with their environments - Allowing institutional influence	Passive Active Proactive Directly Indirectly Discreetly
IV	**Local community e.g. local leaders (panchayats), other local people living in the area where Sangathan operates**	- Receiving direct and indirect monetary, practical or moral support for the educational work	- Conforming to environments - Manipulation of environmental structures	-Perceiving future changes - Protecting past accomplishments - Stockpiling of goodwill/support (e.g. cognitive legitimacy)	- Cooperation, mutual communication, - Meetings (exchange of knowledge) and counselling - Sensitization (discreetly) e.g. via rational explanations/accounts - Convincing/nudging/manipulating -Inclusion, giving locals insight into the organizational work, 'a voice', and influence on the planning. -Signalling predictability and reliability - Achieving cognitive legitimacy (legitimacy gained more effortlessly, without many counterclaims)	Passive Active Proactive Directly
V	**Public school teachers and leadership of local public schools**	Keep children in school Ensuring qualitative public primary education	-Manipulation of environmental structures	- Perceiving future changes - Protecting past accomplishments	- Diplomatic communication & cooperation - Motivational work - Utilization of rational accounts -Arranging seminars/workshops for teachers	Active Directly Indirectly Discreetly
VI	**National & State government & government officials, school departments**	- Getting necessary formal permissions - Ensuring quality education for the children in the local area	- Conforming to environments -Manipulation of environmental structures	- Protecting past accomplishments - Stockpiling of goodwill/support	-Conforming to rules & regulations and accountability demands -Discreet cooperation/taking on a supporting/ catalytic role in terms of educational projects. -Avoiding criticizing the government -Implementing innovative programs - Communication, creating accounts about the organizational work, lobbying	Passive Active Proactive Directly
VII	**Other audiences, e.g. potential future donors, general public**	- Future funding of projects - Gaining goodwill/good reputation/ cognitive legitimacy - Endorsement	- Conforming to environments - Selection of environments -Manipulation of environmental structures	- Stockpiling of goodwill and support - Protecting past accomplishments	-Publication/dissemination of various information via reports, internet, online donor platforms etc. - Rallies. Relying on character references and on good reputation. - Creating accounts with emotional appeal or "new myths or explanations of social reality". - Signalling legitimacy/credibility/worthiness by e.g. getting national/international certifications/recognitions.	Passive Active Directly Indirectly

Analysis, part 1: Legitimacy building work

I will in the following explore Sangathan's legitimacy building work, with main emphasis on the most prevalent strategies, under the following three thematic headings inspired by Suchman's (1995) theory about legitimacy gaining strategies: *Conforming/Passive Strategies*, *Selection of environments, and Manipulative strategies.*

Conforming/passive strategies

Upward accountability, conformism, and isomorphism

A common legitimacy building strategy of organizations is conforming to demands or ideals of their stakeholders or audiences by e.g. mimicking or undergoing *isomorphism* where organizations adopt existing cultural orders and values of external environments etc. (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Suchman1995), and my empirical findings imply that such approaches appear to be central strategies in Sangathan's legitimacy building work. Legitimacy of developing NGOs is determined by e.g. dominant discourses of the development field where NGO theorists tend to link NGO legitimacy with 'accountability' and 'performance' (Lister 2003). The following interview excerpts illustrates how institutional factors in Sangathan's external environment like *stakeholders' accountability demands (*Ebrahim 2003; Hulme & Edwards 2013) and adaptation of *managerial elements* such as professionalism (e.g. Suarez & Gugerty 2016) appear to be tools that Sangathan employs very consciously to gain legitimacy. See the following empirical finding:

> *HRE: Legitimacy and transparency are very important, because without these methods and processes we can not survive in the long run. (...) If we do not have the system of transparency, people don't trust [us]. If is not properly utilized, it might be that [the donor] refuses or shuts down your funding, so the organization must be stopped.* ***[INTERVIEW WITH HRE]***

My informants signalled during the interviews that *upward accountability measures* (Ebrahim 2003; Hulme & Edwards 2013), due to increasing demands from donors and government officials (Carman 2010), is a central tool which Sangathan employs in order to gain legitimacy for their work. I was informed that Sangathan initially self-financed its educational projects, but external funding was implemented when the educational work needed to expand, and as of today the majority of the projects rely heavily on donor aid. As PO described it: *"[The donor funds] are highly needed*". Previously, donor aid was offered more free handedly and with less counterclaims, but presently Sangathan experiences increasing demands from donors regarding e.g. transparency and reporting work, with one of my informants (HRE) linking this tendency with e.g. increased professionalism within the NGO field; increased competition where many NGOs apply for funding from same donors;

and technological development which have improved and speeded up the communication opportunities between e.g. donors and NGOs.These empirical findings correlate with Suchman (1995), who states that *communication* between organizations and its stakeholders is key factor in legitimacy building work, and to previous research exposing how *isomorphism* - in this case adaption of e.g. *managerialism or its elements (*e.g. professionalization and extensive monitoring/ evaluation) - may affect NGOs' prospects of gaining legitimacy and thus support from donors (Jakimow 2010; Suarez & Gaugerty 2016; Willner 2019). The following empirical findings further demonstrates how factors like 'managerialism' (e.g. professionalization) seemingly influence Sangathan's legitimacy building work:

> *"(...) We have invested significantly in building managerial capacities of younger team members, and at the same time enhancing leadership skills in senior team members."*
> ***[Excerpt from "Message from the president" in Annual Report 2019]***
>
> *"Our consultants have long and commendable experience with Government of India, (...) UNICEF, USAID, and UN Agencies. Our Financial Consultants are eminent Chartered Accountants. Our technical consultants are Architectural and Civil Engineers with 10-15 years of relevant experience of working with international agencies (....)"* ***[Excerpt from Sangathan's report to donors: "Project profile of Sangathan"]***

My empirical findings suggest that Sangathan is mindful of the link between NGO legitimacy and e.g. *transparency* and *managerialism* as part of their organizational/project survival (Suchman 1995, Edwards & Hulme 1996a). When asked what role e.g. Sangathan's transparency efforts play in terms of NGO legitimacy, PO, for example, formulated it like this: *"All of the documentation work that we do at Sangathan, is most important [in order] to stay legitimate as an NGO!".* Edwards & Hulme (1996a:3-8) explain that it is *transparent accounting* which is fundamental regarding legitimacy of NGOs' development work, and NGOs therefore need to conduct or signal genuine documentation or reporting of their own achievements and utilization of resources, and be transparent regarding their relationships and decision making processes. In a similar way, my informants (PO, HRE, DIR) explained that their organization puts great emphasis on meeting the accountability demands from their donors in a consistent and highly transparent manner, with HRE and DIR stressing the importance of signalling full transparency in terms of internal affairs (e.g. utilization of funds, salary of staff and the director) and on a larger scale (Meyer & Rowan 1977).

PO also stated that Sangathan fully complies with donors' criteria in terms of transparency, including reporting work, and he stressed his point by narrating that if donors drop unnotified by at Sangathan´s office asking for documentation, the staff is able to instantly hand over such documentation as *"Sangathan has nothing to hide"* and because continuous documentation of the organizational activities and meetings has high priority in the organization. During the interview, PO, by the way, offered me copies of several monthly progress reports from 2019, drafted to donors of their various educational projects (non-formal schools, the formal school etc). By closer inspection, I observed that these progress reports contained detailed information about Sangathan and performance (Lister 2003) in connection with its educational activities, statistics (number of beneficiaries, school attendance etc.), case stories about the recipients "with emotional appeal", photographs, and updated information about the progress, effectiveness, expenditures etc. These empirical findings seem to reflect previous e.g. the 'accountability movement' described by Carman (2010), which refers to a growing tendency amongst donors/authorities of nonprofits/NGOs to require information from nonprofits about their accomplishments, efficiency, spendings etc.

When asked if there were any noticeable differences between the accountability demands of their private donors and governmental donors/agencies, HRE explained in line with e.g. Lister (2003) that although their governmental donors, which fund some school projects, also demand transparency, there are differences regarding what type of information the governmental agencies request since all Indian NGOS are registered under the Society Registration Act and are thus subjected to specific formal rules & regulations, which entails that Sangathan is obligated to report specific information to the authorities such as overview over foreign contributions, the purpose of these contributions etc. HRE explained that during the process of applying for funds from major donors, both private and governmental, Sangathan prepares detailed project proposals, and afterwards both the governmental and major donors (such as donor agencies) conduct field visits prior to making final decisions regarding funding. However, the private donors such as foreign contributors and online donation platforms which Sangathan is affiliated with, have more intense accountability/ transparency demands and control mechanisms. Before making final decisions regarding funding, the private donor platforms/agencies which Sangathan is affiliated with, for example, frequently send their inspectors to conduct "sample checking" and to interact with the target group etc., and afterwards the donor agencies regularly conduct unnotified control visits to Sangathan and its educational centers/projects. HRE stressed in line with PO, that Sangathan fully complies in this context and even welcomes such control mechanisms, with Sangathan even offering the donor agencies detailed travel instructions to their educational centers, so the donor agencies can go straight to the centers themselves without prior notice.

Both HRE and PO stated that meeting these accountability demands from their donors and governmental actors are manageable tasks as their donors e.g. set different criteria regarding the amount of reporting and performance, with some donors requiring less frequent information or only basic information. HRE also pointed out, that their donors usually refrain from setting very high benchmarks/standards in terms of efficiency & performance due to the realization that instant or drastic progress is difficult to achieve within this area, especially during the first phases, and thus emphasis is on long-term planning and long-term goals regarding Sangathan's educational projects for the children.

These empirical findings seem to correlate with Suchman (1995), who explains that the managerial actions of complex organizations can positively affect the legitimacy process, since the managements are typically well-informed about the organizational plans and are cognizant about the value of legitimacy building work (Suchman 1995). Within the nonprofit sector, organizational responses to pressure are often 'compliance' and 'adaptation' (Arvidson 2018:899, Suchman 1995), and seen from institutional perspectives Sangathan´s accountability measures and adaptation to e.g. managerialism may be interpreted as an *isomorphic* process as a response to institutional pressure, and a tool actively utilized by Sangathan in its legitimacy building work (Meyer & Rowan 1977). My informants´s account about Sangathan´s eagerness and ongoing efforts to comply fully with donor's accountability demands and *managerialism* can likewise be interpreted as the passive legitimacy building strategy which Suchman (1995) defines as *'conforming to environments'*. Yet, these measures seem not solely to be responses to external pressure from major donors and governmental actors, but also be driven by Sangathan´s own organizational goals and values, which are likely a reflection of other institutional influences such as fundamental values of the general NGO/nonprofit sector (Cabedo et al.2008).

According to previous research, actions like robust accountability procedures can also help NGOs to identify and address warning signals (Edwards & Hulme 1996a), and my informants pointed out similarly that Sangathan's emphasis on intense documentation/ reporting is also self benefiting in the sense that such actions help Sangathan to make track records of its work (PO, HRE); document how demanding the developing work is (PO); and maintain a level of professionalism which Sangathan desires (HRE). This said, previous research (e.g. Carman 2010) has revealed that donors' accountability demands or *upward accountability* can e.g. overburden organizations. My informants, however, gave mixed signals in this regard. CEP expressed some frustration over the intense documentation demands from the private donors of the educational projects he was coordinating, as he considered the continuous reporting as very strenuous tasks. CEP told me, that he had previously tried to negotiate with the donors about the amount of reporting, but his request was bluntly rejected by the donors, which correlates with Lister´s (2003) notion that it is the stakeholders that set those benchmarks and criteria which NGOs need to meet in order to gain legitimacy and support. My three other informants, on the other hand, signalled that overall Sangathan is not overburdened by their funders' accountability demands, as Sangathan is fully capable of meeting such demands (PO, HRE); has a leadership and management which are cognizant about the link between legitimacy/funding and their stakeholders' demands and thus prioritizes meeting these demands (DIR, PO; HRE); and is defining itself as a developing organizations where concepts like 'transparency' and 'accountability' are considered vital part of Sangathan's own goals and values (DIR).

Values/worthiness

The following empirical findings suggest that Sangathan in line with existing NGOliterature and institutional theory (Suchman1995) also builds up legitimacy from their stakeholders/ audiences by e.g. *signalling to outsiders* that the organization lives up to key values or beliefs in the external environments such as those of maybe United Nations (human rights); the general NGO sector (Hasenfeld 2010; Lister 2003); and the Indian society (Jakimow 2011), such as the belief that NGOs' main objective is to help needy people in a philanthropic manner (e.g. Atack 1999; Cabedo 2008, Jakimow 2011; Zhou & Ye 2019). See the following empirical findings:

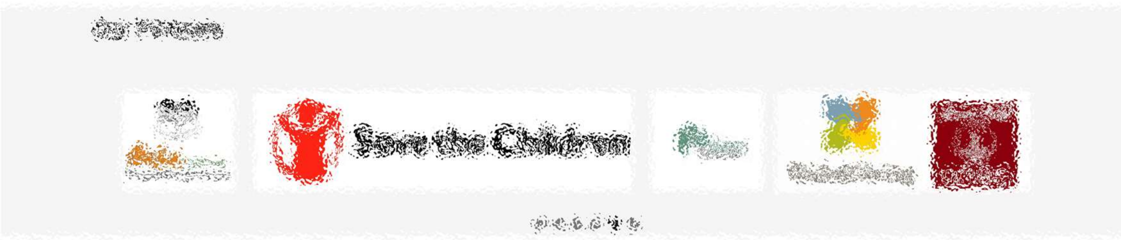
> *"Sangathan is a non-profit, non-government development organization committed to improving the lives of disadvantaged communities in India" (...)* ***[Excerpt from Sangathan's report to potential donors: "Project profile of Sangathan"]***

> *Equality: We believe all people should be treated equal, and do not discriminate against any person regardless of race, religion, gender or social background.*
> ***[Excerpt from Sangathan's homepage, under the heading 'Values']***

> *"Children are the future of the Nation, but without education it is useless.* ***[Excerpt from Sangathan's information page on an online donor platform]***

I have observed that references to these values and other values, e.g. the value of children's education, figure prominently and consistently in various published material both online and in physical form, e.g. in Sangathan's annual reports; strategic plans reports; on Sangathan's homepage and social media profiles; and on online donor platforms which Sangathan is affiliated with in connection with funding of e.g. some of their educational projects. Such actions of Sangathan may be interpreted as the *ceremoniously adaptation of external institutional elements* which function as *myths* that Sangathan seems to draw on as part of their legitimacy building work (Meyer & Rowan 1977).

Meyer & Rowan (1977) imply that it is important that NGOs not only conform to *myths,* but also signal that these myths work in order to gain legitimacy. Institutional theory and empirical literature imply that NGO legitimacy also hinges on the notion that NGOs are considered *worthy* by their audiences (Suchman 1995). This is something which Sangathan appears to be cognizant of during their legitimacy work. I observed, for example, that Sangathan regularly makes references to their many different funders and collaborative partners in different published material, e.g. online and in the annual report. Such actions may be interpreted as Sangathan's way of signalling to outsiders about *its worthiness* and that the *myth* is working, in the sense that Sangathan appears to portray itself as a *worthy* NGO by revealing e.g. how many different donors and partners they have managed to establish cooperation with, both local and from abroad, even influential and well-known ones. See the following empirical finding (screendump) from the frontpage of Sangathan's homepage:



(P.S. This image has been digitally blurred due to ethical reason)

Downward accountability, cooperation and inclusion

As my empirical findings have so far indicated, Sangathan puts great emphasis on *upward accountability during their legitimacy work,* complying with the demands of private and governmental donors by e.g. adapting, mimicking or signalling *isomorphism*. From Lister's (2003) perspective, NGOs also have to relate to other stakeholders in order to survive, as it is the different stakeholders who set the legitimacy criteria and provide NGOs legitimacy. As noted, the NGO literature sends mixed signals regarding what stakeholders local developing NGOs may prioritize in order to ensure survival (see e.g. Hulme & Edwards 2013:8), but empirical research implies that the local developing NGO sector in the South also prioritize legitimacy work in terms of their local stakeholders via e.g. *downward accountability measures* (e.g. Leonard 2012; Jakimow 2010), since such actions can increase NGOs' chances of getting 'access to the field' (Jakimow 2010), and aid and support which are needed in order to carry out developing work (Suchman 1995). In line with this, and as table 1 (II-V) also shows, my empirical findings strongly suggest that Sangathan also actively conducts legitimacy building work in terms of local stakeholders. See the following narration of HRE:

> *"It would hamper the implementation of the programs very much if we do not cooperate so much with the communities". (...) / It is important [with] communication and transparency particularly, so the people can get directly involved.* ***[Interview with HRE]***

If we return back to table 1 (e.g. II - V), we can see that Sangathan also seems to draw on various strategies when attempting to gain legitimacy from local stakeholders, and that these strategies range from *conforming to manipulation* (Suchman 1995). As table 1 (II-V) also reveals, this legitimacy building work is done both directly and indirectly, and visibly and discreetly. The broad scope and complexity of this legitimacy building work is assumingly a reflection of e.g. the "complex and messy environments" in which Sangathan operates (Hulme & Edwards 2013:4; Hasenfeld 2010, Lister 2003). According to my informants and my other empirical findings (e.g. observations), the areas where Sangathan runs its different educational projects, are typically characterized by great poverty, families with unstable and low-income jobs, adult illiteracy, child labour, child marriages, risks of diseases and child trafficking etc. Majority of the beneficiaries' families lack formal schooling and access to children's daycare, and have low-income and unstable jobs etc. Additionally, Sangathan's rural projects are situated in areas prone to natural disasters like flooding and cyclones, which seriously affect the local communities.

During the interviews, my informants (HRE, CEP, DIR) did stress the importance of conducting *downward accountability,* as Sangathan in line with Lister (2003) considers local stakeholders key stakeholders in terms of their educational work for the children. My informants had different opinions regarding which stakeholders they deemed most important, with HRE stressing the importance of prioritizing local stakeholders:

> *HRE: We first respect the local stakeholders, because they have the most important role in the communities." (...) We are very much transparent. We are conducting meetings with the parents and the community stakeholders like the community leaders, like the panchayats and others." (...) / We engage them in the planning of the implementations. We engage them in every step, [ask them to] share their experiences and knowledge and suggestions. And we incorporate that [in the planning]. (...) So that's why - as part of the [children's] education - we are always setting up activities like parents meetings, community awareness, stakeholder engagements. (...)*

These empirical findings suggest that Sangathan also highly prioritizes accountability measures in relation to their local stakeholders as part of their legitimacy building process

(Suchman 1995). Yet, in line with existing literature (e.g. Ebrahim 2003; Leonard 2012), the downward accountability mechanisms of Sangathan appears to be manifested differently than their *upward accountability* measures, as table 1 (I-IV) shows. The *downward accountability* efforts of Sangathan are implemented with tools like transparency, regular social interactions and close cooperation & communication (e.g. Suchman 1995) with different stakeholders from the local areas where Sangathan runs its educational projects, not only the beneficiaries/the parents, but also various other local people/audiences such as local leaders (panchayat) etc. My informants (HRE, CEP, DIR) explained that Sangathan prioritizes mutual and respectful dialogue, cooperation with and social inclusion of local stakeholders who are.g. offered the opportunity to be heard and even be involved in the planning process, actions which seem to correlate with Lister (2003) and previous research about legitimacy building work of the NGO/nonprofit sector (e.g. Ebrahim 2003; Leardini et al.2009; Bertorelli & Brar 2012). Sangathan's considerations to and acceptance of local stakeholders' experiences & ideas may, from institutional perspectives, also be interpreted as legitimacy building strategies that Suchman (1995) categorizes as *'conforming to environments'*.

Strategies: Selection of environments

NGOs are from institutional perspectives not solely passive actors, but can also be highly responsive and proactive (Thompson 2003; Weick 1977; Gnees & Vermeulen 2019), and my empirical findings suggest that this also applies to Sangathan, which appears to also employ those active/proactive legitimacy building strategies that Suchman (1995) categorizes as *"Selection of environments",* which are strategies employed by those organizations that (also) wish to avoid conformism. These strategies entail that organizations build up legitimacy by consciously selecting stakeholders or environments that are more positively inclined towards its actions or services, without having many counterclaims (Suchman 1995). In line with this, some of my informants (HRE, DIR) stressed that although Sangathan is compliant and open minded in terms of various demands or suggestions from their different stakeholders (Thompson 2003), there are areas where the organization is less compliant, e.g. in terms of Sangathan's visions, missions and values, as these are considered founding pillars of the organization. Due to the same reasons, and because donor match is considered a vital part of Sangathan's project planning and visions to achieve long-term funding and sustainability for their projects (HRE, DIR), Sangathan is "very choosy" regarding which donors and partners it collaborates with, with HRE, who is in charge of donor funding and strategy planning, narrating the following:

HRE: "*I am continuously searching for donors that match with us. So we approach them and meet with them (...) / As our vision and missions are fixed, we are approaching like minded NGOs who are in line with our visions and missions. If they accept our proposals then it will work, otherwise not, because different organizations have different visions and different missions.*" ***[Interview with HRE]***

According to Suchman (1995), '*selection of environments'* strategies also entail that organizations conduct legitimacy gaining work by choosing stakeholders/donors which provide legitimacy based on certifications and very formal and specific criteria. Previous research has shown that NGOs, which are viewed as *trustworthy* or *credible*, increase their chances of gaining legitimacy from donors and local people (Omona & Mukuye 2012; Zhou & Ye 2019), and my empirical findings imply accordingly that Sangathan is highly cognizant of its image and what role it plays in their legitimacy building work. See the following statement:

INTERVIEWER: (...) Generally, what do you think makes a local NGO in India trustworthy in stakeholders' eyes or in the Indian society?
HRE: First of all I want to say that an NGO is trustworthy in terms of transparency and accountability in the public domain. It is very important. Second thing: that the organization is credible. It needs to be some kind of certification. ***[Interview with HRE]***

HRE said that it is essential to signal to outsiders, including (potential) donors, that Sangathan is a good and legitimate organization, and emphasis is therefore on getting official recognition, both nationally and internationally, in the form of e.g. certifications from accrediting agencies which require the NGO's to live up to "specific norms and standards". HRE revealed during the interviews, that Sangathan already possesses quite a few of these certifications, including vetted international certification, which the organization strategically employs in their attempt to ensure legitimacy for e.g. their educational projects. HRE explained that Sangathan has joined various online donor platforms, both Indian and international, where individuals can donate money to various development projects, including some of Sangathan's educational projects. During the interview, HRE guided me to some of these platforms on my laptop. I also observed that references to various certifications & awards were made on Sangathan's official homepage and in other published material, e.g. annual reports; the organizations' profile to donors). During my field visits I also observed various certifications and awards being displayed quite visibly at e.g. Sangathan's office walls. See the following images taking during my field visits or retrieved from Sangathan's homepage (P.S. The images have been digitally blurred due to ethical reasons):



Manipulative strategies

According to Suchman (1995), legitimacy building work can be very challenging as complex organizations may face great uncertainties, especially when introducing new activities that are e.g. weakly institutionalized or when facing critical audiences, and in such situations manipulative legitimacy building strategies may be needed, typically when other strategies fail or are insufficient, a tendency which is also described in the empirical literature e.g. in Srivastava's (2008) study of low-fee private schools in India. Although Sangathan, according to my informants, does not encounter major obstacles in their educational work for the children, my informants (HRE, PO, DIR) acknowledged in line with Suchman (1995) that Sangathan may sometimes face different institutional challenges or uncertainties, which can hamper their work for the children and which may compel Sangathan's staff to also conduct intense and proactive legitimacy building work, even utilizing strategies which may be interpreted as *manipulative*. Gnes & Vermeulen (2019) explain that NGOs are not solely compliant or submissive in their contact with their stakeholders, but can also be immensely strategic and manipulative in their interactions with their stakeholders, with Suchman (1995) stating that complex organizations can even construct or declare new myths or explanation of social reality via various tools, e.g. strategic communication and lobbying. According to Suchman (1995), manipulation is most commonly utilized in legitimacy work of innovative organizations, and when the subject of NGO legitimacy was brought up during our interviews, DIR highlighted e.g. their government approved model primary school, which is described in project reports as innovative, holistically oriented and "a catalyst for positive change". DIR explained that Sangathan's model school was initially a response to the lack of quality public primary education in the area, where Sangathan's head office is situated, but today this model school is also strategically being utilized by the organization in order to be viewed as legitimate by their stakeholders, especially governmental actors (e.g. educational departments) which DIR considers major key stakeholders in terms of their educational initiatives for the children:

Interviewer: So what do you think makes Sangathan, a local Indian NGO, legitimate in stakeholders' eyes?
DIR: That the local NGOs, the Indian NGOs, are also piloting different and innovating programs. This is also very important. The government implements flagship programs, but they don't know which programs will be very much beneficial for the people. So then the NGO [can demonstrate]or pilot some innovative program or ideas [which can be] demonstrated in front of different stakeholders, mainly the government stakeholders, different line departments, maybe the education department. ***[Interview with DIR]***

DIR's statement implies that another tool in order to gain legitimacy from stakeholders like governmental officials is by Sangathan portraying itself as an *innovator and catalyst*.

Previous research has revealed that NGOs can go through very complex social processes in order to ensure legitimacy and support from stakeholders (see e.g. Ebrahim 2003; Leonard 2012, Leardini et al. 2009, Bertorelli & Brar 2012), and my empirical findings imply that Sangathan goes through similar social processes in their attempt to gain legitimacy from their different stakeholders, especially critical or reluctant audiences (Suchman 1995, Lister 2003, Gnes & Vermeulen 2019), something which also necessitates manipulative legitimacy building tools, possibly also 'formulation of new myths or explanations of social reality" (Suchman 1995). This complex legitimacy building work is reflected in the following account:

HRE: Initially [the antisocials for example] obstructed [our efforts/work]. [They told us] to not open the schools, buildings and everything. (...) Hence we continuously conducted meetings, sensitizations and home visits and everything. Hence we tried to motivate them to get involved with our programs. We sensitize them and get them involved with our programs. Finally we succeeded, and everywhere where our [child education] centers are, those people are also part of the committees. So now they have the leading roles. (...) / We started counselling. Counselling means [to tell the protesters] about the importance of the education center and why it is important to educate these children. We tried to convince them [by saying]: "You are not educated. You never got this kind of opportunity. You are doing your profession. Ok, no problem, we are not disturbing you, because we are not the police or something like this. If we set up the education center, if your child gets education, what do you think? You are getting drugs every day, you are smuggling and everything. Do you want to see your child do these kinds of things in the future?" Finally they agreed.

According to institutional theory, NGOs have to constantly "justify to others about their right to exist and to act" (Gnees & Vermeulen 2019:242-247), but NGOs get in this context a variety of responses from their audiences, and hence NGOs must be alert and respond to different external expectations or reactions (ibid), e.g. by actively interacting with their external environments (Suchman 1995). In line with this, HRE narrated about Sangathan's previous encounters with some local stakeholders (e.g. antisocials), who had fiercely objected Sangathan's plans of establishing some non-formal rehabilitation centers for out-of-school children in areas characterized by antisocial activities etc. Since NGO legitimacy relies on e.g. audiences' perception of NGO work (Suchman 1995), Sangathan's staff proactively worked on reversing their audiences' negative perceptions towards their educational plans. In this context, Sangathan went through something which could be interpreted as *a cultural process* (Suchman 1995) where a plethora of strategies and tools were utilized strategically, proactively and even manipulative by the organization's staff in order to gain legitimacy from the locals, such as conducting motivational work; counseling; strategic communication; sensitization; and even home visits (see table 1, III og V). In order for NGOs to be viewed as legitimate, it is essential that NGOs also provide rational explanations of its actions (Suchman 1995), and we can see in HRE's narration from just before how Sangathan can also employ such tools during their legitimacy building process, e.g. 'manipulatively' explaining to sceptical audiences about the purpose and benefits of its educational work in order to gain legitimacy from them etc.

CEP shared a similar story during the interview. He explained that Sangathan sometimes also face parents/guardians, who are very sceptical or reluctant to enroll their children into the formal school system due to poverty or cultural reasons (e.g. lack of insight into the value of education). In such instances, active legitimacy building work is put in motion by Sangathan in order to gain legitimacy from these parents, so their children can be enrolled into the formal school system, in public schools or in Sangathan's model school. See table 1 (III). My informants explained how Sangathan e.g. tries to convince and motivate the parents to send their children to school by informing them about the benefits of children's education via e.g. *'rational accounts with emotional appeal'* (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019:242). When Sangathan fails with such endeavour, the staff members may also rely on more intricate and indirect legitimacy building strategies. Thompson (2003) explains how complex organizations due to uncertainties need to apply *open system approaches* where they form interdependent relationships with actors in the external environments in order to survive, and my empirical findings reveal accordingly that Sangathan also forms such relationships with various local actors when facing e.g. *uncertainties* that may hamper their educational work. In some instances, more intricate and indirect approaches are needed in order to build up legitimacy as the following interview excerpts illustrate:

> *INTERVIEWER: So why do you think it is so important to keep good relations with the panchayats (local leaders)?*
> *CEP: Because there are a few problems, which are not possible for us or other stakeholders to solve other than these panchayats members [who] convince the parents* ***[INTERVIEW WITH CEP]***

CEP explained, that if the staff of Sangathan, for example, fail to motivate poor parents to enroll their children into e.g. its educational projects, then these families can be *indirectly* reached by drawing on support from local leaders (panchayats) or other influential people in the local community, who the parents look up to or trust, and who help Sangathan to convince the parents about the benefits of children's education and of enrolling their children to school or in Sangathan's projects. Similar tools appear, by the way, to be utilized during Sangathan's out-reach work in the public schools, when Sangathan e.g. faces sceptical public stakeholders (Suchman 1995) such as public school teachers, who may not be motivated or who are sceptical about the organization's interventions (See table 1:V). DIR revealed how Sangathan in this context utilizes a combination of tools as *"there are no ready made solutions"*, such as cooperation; diplomatic and strategic communication with focus on "explaining social reality" to the teachers (Suchman 1995); establishment of interdependent relationships (Thompson 2003), and other direct or indirect tools such as getting other actors to motivate the unmotivated teachers etc.

Analysis, part 2: Legitimacy maintaining work

In this part of the analysis I will thematically explore Sangathan's legitimacy maintaining work, under the following main headings inspired by Suchma´ s (1995) categories: *Perceiving future changes; Protecting past accomplishments.* This part of the analysis will reflect that some of the tools, which are utilized by Sangathan in their legitimacy building work, are similar to those applied to build up legitimacy.

Strategies: Perceiving future changes

According to institutional theory, legitimacy maintaining work is easier than legitimacy gaining work, since it is usually easier for organizations to maintain legitimacy once it is achieved (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019:239). Yet, as noted, Sangathan operates in very heterogeneous environments, and according to institutional theory it is especially challenging for organizations to conduct legitimacy work in such milieus, as it can be difficult to satisfy all stakeholders and take into consideration all factors under such conditions (Hasenfeld 2010). NGOs need to be constantly cognizant of societal changes, and to audiences' perceptions of and expectations to organizations and their work etc. (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019). Analysis of my empirical findings implies that Sangathan also conducts legitimacy building work, and in this context a variety of strategies are also applied, some of which may be interpreted as *"Perceiving future changes"* which entail, that NGOs are attentive to their audiences' reactions and are being foresighted about future institutional challenges. Tools employed in this context are typically intense contact with external environments; insight into cultural elements and audience's reactions/values/beliefs; and permitting external institutional factors to influence the organization (Suchman 1995). As revealed in the first analysis phase, we saw that key tools for gaining legitimacy from major stakeholders of Sangathan appeared to be e.g. compliance; cooperation with stakeholders; inclusion during e.g. the planning work; and consideration to different cultural norms and values etc. Similar tools appear to be applied by Sangathan in their endeavour to maintain legitimacy. See table 1 (II, IV) and the following accounts:

> *CEP:/[The parents] are like relatives. hahaha. They feel free to share everything. (...) We rectify the issues and try to solve the problems in collaboration with the parents and also with the teachers and the management. (...) /We give [considerations] to all the stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, managing committee, community members.* ***[Interview with CEP]***

As these empirical findings reveal, Sangathan emphasizes regular interaction with their various stakeholders during their legitimacy building work, interaction with and communicating with both the parents and other actors from the local communities where the educational projects are implemented. CEP assumed that their stakeholders' willingness to cooperate and interact with Sangathan is related to the fact that the organization puts great emphasis on maintaining good relations with the stakeholders through e.g. "conversations", communication, collaborations, regular stakeholder meetings etc. In order to maintain legitimacy from specifically the parents, the staff of Sangathan utilize different tools like signalling full transparency and great willingness to provide the parents with information, and also demonstrating that the staff is willing to amend their own mistakes and has a sincere desire to solve problems concerning the students/children in collaboration with the parents. According to CEP, Sangathan is also open minded towards suggestions, not only from the children and their parents, but also from their other stakeholders such as teachers, committees and community members. Another legitimacy maintaining tool of Sangathan, in line with existing literature (e.g. Ebrahim 2003; Bertorelli & Brar 2012), appears to be the empowerment of the parents, giving them a "sense of ownership" by e.g. encouraging them to freely approach Sangathan with their enquiries/suggestions, and asking the parents, whose children attend Sangathan's model primary school, to pay a small symbolic school fee. As HRE formulated it: " *So we are dealing with the parents as stakeholders, because when they contribute with some things, they are proud, feel comfortable to ask [us] many things."*

However, these interactions and communication with local stakeholders also seem to serve the purpose of giving Sangathan's staff and management teams insight into "cultural elements"; their stakeholders' values & beliefs (Suchman 1995); and their audience's perception of and reactions to Sangathan's work (Pfeffer & Salancik 1993). HRE described the process like this:

> *HRE: We respect the communities and cultures. (...) So local stakeholders and local community leaders, panchayats and others and some of the educated parents, they know the basic reasons as to why [these issues occur]."* ***[Interview with HRE]***

When directly asked if Sangathan is working strategically with legitimacy work, HRE confirmed this, and he admitted that the organization's interactions with stakeholders provide the organization with vital knowledge about the local communities, e.g. why the children drop-out of school or why child trafficking occurs. In each operational area, Sangathan has a management team, and these teams meet on a regular basis with the senior management team/board, and the managements, in line with Suchman 1995, strategically utilize their gained 'cultural insight' into the local communities during the planning and problem-solving processes, as part of their developing work and desire to ensure e.g. legitimacy.

Strategies: Protecting past accomplishments

According to Suchman (1995) organizations can also maintain their legitimacy by other methods such as utilizing those strategies which Suchman defines as *"Protecting past accomplishments".* These strategies entail that organizations anchor gained legitimacy more firmly in the organization via different noncoercive tools such as displaying "legitimate organizational authority"; avoiding situations that attract scrutiny, removing uncertainties; and conducting discreet legitimacy work. My empirical findings have so far implied that Sangathan is an organization which approaches its legitimacy work in a dichotomous manner, being both passive/compliant and very proactive (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019; Weick 1977) in their efforts to ensure legitimacy from their various stakeholders.

As noted, NGOs can face "*conflicting relationships with states, donors, partners and constituents"* due to their position in the international aid- and ecosystem (Banks, Hulme & Edwards 2015:715), and Sangathan appears to be a social actor, who is conscious of this position, and how its actions or behaviour may affect its chances of ensuring the organization and its work legitimacy. Statements from HRE and DRE suggest that Sangathan's leadership thus strategically calculates what approaches to take in order to avoid scrutiny or conflicting relationships with key stakeholders. See, for example the following answers I got from DIR, when I asked about Sangathan's relationship with governmental stakeholders in connection with educational programs for the children:

> *DIR: (...) Our role is very supportive. We are always trying to (...) supplement and complement the government's goals. That's why we are not the competitor. We are not only criticizing the government projects or government departments or the government school projects. But we can also play a very catalytic role (...)*
> *INTERVIEWER: Do you think it would be more difficult for Sangathan to be [viewed as] legitimate in the government's eyes if you were critical of the government?*
> *DIR: Yes.* ***[INTERVIEW WITH DIR]***

These approaches are also reflected in Sangathan's Strategic Plan Report (2017-2022), where the following is declared: *"Where possible, Sangathan should offer support and input to [the] Government, ensuring our activities reflect and are in sync with Government initiatives."* These empirical findings imply that Sangathan does not consider its role regarding their educational work as being a competitor or criticizer of the government, due to awareness of the potential negative consequences (Thompson 2003) this will have for their gained legitimacy. Instead, Sangathan takes on a *complementary, supportive and "catalytic" role*, ensuring that its educational activities are synchronized with or echo the governmental initiatives. From Suchman's (1995) perspective, one may interpret this approach as *discreet legitimacy protecting work* (see table 1:VI). Similar discreet legitimacy protecting work also appears to be conducted in the local communities (see table 1:IV), as HRE admitted that the involvement of local stakeholders in Sangathan's planning processes is also a strategic tool employed to safeguard legitimacy, by avoiding conflicts with the local community/local stakeholders. HRE explained that if the organizational plans fail, then their audiences are fully aware that Sangathan can not solely be blamed for this, as they were also part of the planning process. As HRE formulated it (slightly paraphrased): *"Because if you [as a stakeholder] is part of the planning process and part of the discussion and then something goes wrong, then you are aware of what we are doing".*

According to institutional theory and previous research, NGOs can also maintain their legitimacy by e.g. being *predictable and reliable*, and in accordance with this, HRE, for example, shared that Sangathan in their interactions with the local communities puts great emphasis on building up a good reputation and ensuring that their stakeholders trust and believe in the organization. This is achieved by e.g. avoiding giving their stakeholders/audiences "false commitments", and by keeping promises and providing the local people/stakeholders with proper help and support. As *HRE explained it: People can see they get the results [according to what] we have discussed before [with them]. They also get the support according to their needs. So that's why their trust and their belief towards Sangathan is gradually increased ."*

According to Suchman (1995), other legitimacy protecting tools are stockpiling of goodwill and support; the utilization of simple and natural accounts of organizational behaviour; and relying on cognitive legitimacy. My empirical data indicates that such tools are also being actively utilized by Sangathan as part of their legitimacy maintaining process. When reading the various documents collected from Sangathan (e.g. yearly report and progress reports to different donors of the educational projects), and scrutinizing texts and images on the internet (mostly Sangathan's homepage and social media profiles), I observed, for example, that Sangathan regularly publishes many images, "natural accounts", and reports about its projects, progress and outcomes. DIR explained accordingly during one of the interviews, that visibility, also through the internet and social media profiles such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, is also considered an essential part of Sangathan's legitimacy process, as this gives the organization the opportunity to continuously publish information about Sangathan online with the intention of reaching their stakeholders and audiences around the world. DIR pointed out that publication of online information has become highly relevant now that Sangathan's fundraising work is also taking place on online crowdfunding platforms. Another recurrent legitimacy maintaining tool of Sangathan appears to be the publication of positive statements from e.g. foreign volunteers, donors and visitors about their experiences and impression of Sangathan and its work. Such actions may be interpreted as e.g. *stockpiling of goodwill and support* (Suchman 1995).

What stockpiling of *cognitive legitimacy* concerns, Suchman (1995) states that this type of legitimacy is hard to achieve, yet my empirical data suggests that Sangathan has managed to stockpile legitimacy from external audiences, which is being employed as part of the legitimacy work. HRE explained that the organization due to e.g. its long track-history, developing work, and internet has managed to build up a positive reputation, also beyond its operational areas, which can benefit his organization. See the following narration by HRE, when I asked him what advantages an old NGO like Sangathan may have over younger NGOs in terms of ensuring legitimacy and external support:

> *HRE: This is one of the benefits, [that] everybody knows our organization. As the organization has existed for a long time with the activities, the different departments and stakeholders very much associate with the organization. They believe us. [It] is also a benefit, that people who know the organization, they also share via certain platforms [information about Sangathan] to others, who do not know that we exist. We approach them, and then they suddenly can remember [us and say to us]:(...) No problem. We can give you full support!"* ***[INTERVIEW WITH HRE]***

Analysis, part 3: Actions to protect NGO agency

The previous analysis have illuminated that Sangathan is confronted with different types of uncertainties during their legitimacy work, which may not only challenge their legitimacy work (Suchman 1995), but even their *agency*, e.g. when confronted with sceptical, critical, influential or powerful stakeholders and other audiences. My empirical findings suggest that Sangathan, nonetheless, possesses certain characteristics and *"an extensive response repertoire"* (Weick 1977, 1999) that may protect its agency (Weick 1999), meaning Sangathan's opportunity to initiate independent actions and choices when confronted with challenges to their agency (Battilana & D'Aunno 2009). This is reflected for example in the previous narrations about Sangathan's response mechanisms when the staff faced resistance from e.g. unmotivated public teachers, or antisocials in the areas where the organization established some children's rehabilitation centers (see table 1:IV & V). Although tools for protecting *agency* have already been directly or indirectly analyzed, I will, in order to enhance the understanding, conduct some further analysis. This analysis will reflect that tools employed to protect organizational *agency* resemble those employed to ensure legitimacy.

My empirical findings imply that in order to protect its agency, Sangathan draws on different tools such as ensuring that their audiences do not lose faith or trust in the organization by e.g. signalling "an aura of confidence" and that the organization's developing work is proper and successful (Meyer & 1977). See the following interview excerpts:

> *CEP: [NGO's reputation] is absolutely important, because if you are not able to achieve [good] reputation from the community, then the community members will try to ignore you. So it is very important to have trust of the local community [because] then they will trust you and also respect the institution.* ***[Interview with CEP]***
>
> *DIR: (...) Whenever we have just finished [a project] and have gotten a lot of exposure and [have] demonstrated these kinds of ideas or the schools, then gradually the community people are also accepting [it].* ***[Interview with DIR]***

During the interviews, my informants (CEP, DIR, HRE) explained that in order for Sangathan to run their operations smoothly and to achieve its goals, it is essential for the organization to employ what can be defined as *open system approaches* (Thompson 2003). Both HRE and DIR specified that Sangathan is also open minded towards advice and inspiration from others, with DIR explaining that the leadership accepts inputs from both the staff members and external audiences such as stakeholders or other organizations. DIR explained that the organization emphasizes *collective leadership,* which entails that staff members, who are viewed as experts in their fields, are encouraged to freely contribute with their expertise and problem solving advice in e.g. Sangathan's senior management team, with the chance of advancing to *"the highest level of the decision making body"*. What openness towards external inspiration & cooperation concerns, DIR explained that his organization is '*flexible'* in terms of mutual cooperation with different actors from India and abroad. In this context Sangathan e.g. regularly arranges or participates in different national or international fora such as open sessions and workshops where academicians are also invited. According to DIR, Sangathan has also joined a knowledge exchange program with other organizations with focus on sharing "human resources"; and other platforms with emphasis on achieving e.g. 'common strategies'. See the following statement:

> *DIR: So we have a very open strategy, where every organization and [different] people can come together and create a common platform and introduce a common strategy. It is not always possible, but we [at Sangathan] are also very much open. And that's why it is very important. (...) / We are also learning from other NGOs.* ***[Interview with DIR]***

However, when Sangathan is confronted with very difficult dilemmas or other uncertainties that may heavily challenge their agency during their legitimacy work, e.g. conflicting or difficult demands from their stakeholders (Meyer & Rowan 1977) or potential conflicting relationships with their stakeholders (Banks, Hulme & Edwards 2015), it appears that Sangathan also relies on *closed system approaches* in order to secure their agency, utilizing in this context tools like *'buffering', which* resembles the aforementioned legitimacy maintaining strategy 'selection of environments'. *Buffering* entails that Sangathan also applies *closed system approaches,* which means that the organization rejects specific external elements, since such an approach may internally stabilize the organizations and enable its staff to take decisions and carry out their developing work independently (Thompson 2003; Lynn 2005). DIR explained that the leadership is e.g. inclined to prioritize stakeholders who do not demand of Sangathan to change its own mission and visions, as the leadership does not consider such actions beneficial for their developing work, long-term goals and beneficiaries. See the following statements by DIR:

> *DIR: (...) I am not accepting all donor funds. [We are interested in those donors] who are very interested to participate in this kind of process [in our] way. And sometimes we can also discuss mutually. Maybe I am not always right, and the donor may [suggest]: "Ok, you are also doing well, but if you introduce this kind of system, maybe your work will be better".*
> ***[Interview with DIR]***

Another central tool for protecting agency appears to be the *signalling or expression of authority and power.* As mentioned earlier, a concept like 'power' is not prevalent in institutional theory (Lister 2003), yet my empirical findings imply in line with e.g. Collins (1992) and Gnes & Vermeulen (2019), that Sangathan has managed to gain power from their audiences, which the organization is very conscious of. HRE explained it like this: *"[We have] strength. As you heard, lots of people know Sangathan. It means that Sangathan has lakhs of arms, [which] the political parties [notice]. If Sangathan has people's power, so every political party [wishes] to maintain relations [with us]."* During the interview both HRE and DIR highlighted Sangathan's power as an important organizational tool, and this power appears to be employed strategically by the leadership or management in specific situations, e.g. when confronting powerful or influential stakeholders (Gnes & Vermeulen 2019) such as local political parties and foreign donors that may heavily challenge Sangathan's agency. In situations like this, the leadership can be very firm in terms of maintaining e.g. their own plans and problem solving methods. In such instances the leadership, for example, may utilize its authority and power to convince certain stakeholders, e.g. donors, to align their strategies and attitudes with those of Sangathan. In this case the leadership may even manage to change the stakeholders' *'actual definition of legitimacy'* and instill in them 'new logics', so it benefits Sangathan (Garrow & Hasenfeld 2010). See the following statement by DIR:

> *DIR: Whenever I am interacting with some of the external donors or foreign donors, I am also changing their mindset. [I can say to them]: "This is not the appropriate strategy to solve this problem, because this is the local situation, this is a local problem, and this kind of human resource or material resource is available. So please, you utilize these resources most optimally and design the solution to the problem."*
> *Interviewer: So is it your impression that donors are also flexible and listen to what you are saying?*
> *DIR: Yes. Some of the donors are also very much flexible. And this is also my confidence and satisfaction . And sometimes we also convince not only the [local] stakeholders, but also the external donors. Yes, we can also change their strategies and attitudes [during] the implementation of the program.*

6. Conclusion

The purpose of my study was to qualitatively explore legitimacy work within the local developing NGO sector in the South, analyzing via a single case-study what strategies may be employed to gain and maintain legitimacy in highly institutional settings, and what actions may be initiated to protect organizational agency during the legitimacy work process.

In line with my theoretical framework and previous literature, my empirical findings imply that a local developing NGO like Sangathan is aware that it is merged with a greater *aid- and ecosystem (*Banks, Hulme, & Edwards 2015) due to e.g. its high dependency on external monetary aid and other types of support (Suchman 1995). Existing literature presents mixed opinions or results regarding how local developing NGOs navigate in this aid-and ecosystem when attempting to ensure external legitimacy and support from their stakeholders, yet, my empirical findings strongly suggest in line with institutional theory (e.g. Lister 2003), and some empirical studies (e.g. Bertorelli & Brar 2012) that Sangathan has a need and desire to address stakeholders from different societal levels, meaning foreign and local donors, national governmental officials and local people & communities. My empirical findings likewise suggest in line with e.g. Hasenfeld (2010) that gaining and maintaining legitimacy can be a multifaceted and challenging endeavour for a human service NGO like Sangathan due to different external *uncertainties* such as highly institutional settings with many different stakeholders, whose demands or reactions may be challenging and even conflicting. My empirical findings are in many ways consistent with existing literature in terms of what strategies or tools a local NGO like Sangathan appears to employ to ensure legitimacy for themselves and their developing work. Analysis of my empirical data - illustrated in table 1- suggests that Sangathan strategically and skillfully employs a variety of passive and proactive strategies and tools in different contexts in order to ensure legitimacy, which serves the overall purpose to attract external financial, moral and other types of support that may enhance the survival chances of the organization and its developing work (Suchman 1995).

Legitimacy building strategies

Analysis of my empirical findings indicate that Sangathan's strategies to build up legitimacy from their stakeholders/audiences may vary, depending on type of stakeholders/audiences and what kind of resources or inputs they have to offer the organization, but legitimacy building work appears to be actively conducted both upwards (in relation to funders and governmental agencies) and downwards (on local/community level). In terms of state and local governmental agencies, Sangathan appears to draw on different tools, but the legitimacy work requires *a strategic balancing act* due to Sangathan's wish to avoid conflicts with government officials. In this case, Sangathan appears to take on a more compliant and complimentary position with emphasis on fully complying with formal criteria imposed on them by governmental officials, and signalling willingness to cooperate smoothly with government officials in terms of reaching common development goals (e.g. concerning education for poor children). Fulfilling formal governmental criteria, including accountability criteria, appears not to be a very challenging task, but in some instances Sangathan needs to draw on more sophisticated and proactive legitimacy gaining strategies such as utilizing manipulative tools and portraying itself as a *catalyst* and *innovative a*ctor in order to gain legitimacy.

In order to build up legitimacy from private donors (funding agencies and private donors from India and abroad), a more broad and complex toolbox appears to be employed, with strategies and tools ranging from *conformism to proactiveness*. Sangathan appears to put great emphasis on effectuating and signalling full compliance regarding their donors' formal criteria & demands in terms of e.g. accountability, transparency and professionalism, as the demands from private donors can be very high. Yet, more active and proactive strategies are also employed in the legitimacy building work in terms of private funders, e.g. the consciously selection of funders that are more compliant and cooperative towards the organization and its plans (Suchman 1995); or Sangathan signalling to external audiences - via different traditional and digital channels and certifications/recognitions - about e.g. the organization's worthiness, credibility and alignment with goals & values that are accepted or held in high regard in the external environments.

When it comes to building up legitimacy from local stakeholders such as the beneficiaries or other local people, the employed strategies and tools are also many and varied, but downward legitimacy work appears to be expressed and implemented differently, assumingly because Sangathan is faced with other types of uncertainties og demands from local stakeholders. Central legitimacy gaining strategies and tools appear to be e.g. meeting stakeholders' basic needs; regular social interactions and close communication; and cooperation with and consideration to views and suggestions of local stakeholders/audiences. However, when e.g. introducing new activities or confronting sceptical local audiences, Sangathan appears to employ more intricate and non-conventional legitimacy building tools such as convincing sceptical audiences with help of e.g. dialogue with 'rational accounts'/'emotional appeal'; or using manipulative and indirect tools such as getting influential outsiders to convince sceptical audiences to view Sangathan or its projects in a more positive light etc.

Legitimacy maintaining strategies

My empirical findings also suggest that when protecting achieved legitimacy, different strategies and tools are also employed, many which resemble those utilized during legitimacy building work. A central strategy appears to be *continuous contact with, communication with, and inclusion of local stakeholders*, not solely beneficiaries, but also other local audiences, e.g. people with influence and knowledge about community problems. Emphasis is on e.g.

offering "people a voice" and even including them in the planning process. Such tools appear to be utilized strategically by Sangathan to gain e.g. cultural insight into local communities as part of its strategic plan to e.g. mitigate legitimacy crises. Another central legitimacy maintaining strategy appears to be *stockpiling of goodwill and support* from stakeholders and other audiences who are positively inclined towards the organization and its work. This tool appears to be utilized by Sangathan as e.g. character reference under different circumstances, e.g. when disseminating information to stakeholders and other audiences about the organization through traditional or digital channels. In this context, the organization also appears to be drawing on stockpiled *cognitive legitimacy*.

Strategies for protecting NGO agency

My empirical data has also illuminated that the uncertainties which Sangathan is confronted with during their legitimacy work may also challenge their *agency*, meaning the organization's ability to make independent choices and actions. Yet, analysis of my empirical data insinuates that Sangathan, due to its characteristics and *"an extensive response repertoire"* (Weick 1977,1999) is able to draw on different tools & actions in order to protect its agency during legitimacy work. Tools employed are e.g. signalling and portraying Sangathan as a confident organization that conducts proper and efficient developing work. In more challenging situations, e.g. when confronted with difficult dilemmas or conflicting stakeholders' demands, more complex tools appear to be employed, such as 'buffering' (Thompson 2003). My empirical findings imply that in order to protect organizational agency, Sangathan's leadership and management are both open minded towards e.g. internal and external advice (e.g. solutions to problems) from various actors, while simultaneously rejecting e.g. stakeholders whose visions and missions do not align with those of the organization. In more extreme situations, Sangathan may even employ their authority and power to protect its agency.

7. Final discussion

I am aware that the information I have produced in connection with this case study offers solely a partial glimpse of legitimacy work within the NGO sector (e.g. Denscombe 2014). However, my single-case study illustrates and implies in line with institutional theory and previous research, that legitimacy work within the local developing NGO sector in the South can be an intricate and cumbersome process, especially in highly institutional settings due to many different uncertainties and many stakeholders to address. As noted, legitimacy work of the local developing NGO sector in the South is not a highly researched subject (Lister 2003; Martí & Mair 2009), with limited knowledge of how NGO legitimacy is formed etc. (Lister 2003). Taking e.g. these factors into consideration, and the great role that developing NGOs play in underprivileged societies, my qualitative study about NGO legitimacy work may (hopefully) have contributed with more in-depth and relevant knowledge about legitimacy work processes. My study signals the importance of enhancing the understanding of NGO legitimacy work in the South by conducting more in-depth empirical qualitative studies. Information yielded from such research could provide e.g. NGO practitioners with valuable and updated insights, which could be used as e.g. inspiration in terms of improving or strengthening their NGO's legitimacy work in a manner that can improve or increase the chances of (continued) support and survival.

My single-case study, by the way, has raised some more questions and ideas in terms of further research. As my empirical findings suggest, a local NGO like Sangathan, which heavily relies on external fundings, seems to be aware of the importance of conducting legitimacy work. Yet, as NGOs' *own justifications to legitimacy* may be wrong (Gnes & Vermuelen 2019), it would be interesting to also qualitatively explore legitimacy work from the perspective of stakeholders and other key audiences. What criteria do e.g. local stakeholders or people willing to fund NGOs via online fundraising platforms think that local developing NGOs should meet in order to be "worthy" of their financial and moral support? How can local developing NGOs reach more audiences/funders with the help of new funding channels such as the internet and social media? Answers to such questions could be compared with NGOs' *"own justifications to legitimacy"* in order to identify similarities, discrepancies etc.

Lastly I will make some additional methodological reflections in terms of theory. I have analyzed my empirical data from a social constructivist perspective with help of predominantly institutional theory, which is widely applied in organizational studies (Greenwood et al.2012; Meyer & Höllerer 2014; Alvesson & Spicer 2019). Yet, I am aware that NGO legitimacy work can also be comprehended from other theoretical perspectives (see e.g. Garrow & Hasenfeld 2010). This is also relevant to consider when taking into account critics like Smith (1990), who has pointed out that there is risk of e.g. bias and incomplete understanding when researchers employ Western based theories about e.g. organizations and social interactions in a non-Western context, as Western theories reflect Western cultural values, norms, cultures etc. Such methodological risks could maybe be mitigated by e.g.

applying other types of theories in combination with intense empirical research and e.g. grounded theory. This noted, my empirical findings suggest that the concept of '*power'* and NGOs' authority (or lack thereof) may also greatly influence NGO' legitimacy work processes. Although 'power' has not been analyzed in-depth in my study, theories about 'power', for example, would probably enhance the understanding of those processes that local developing NGOs go through when conducting legitimacy work. Although Bourdieu has a Western background, it would also be interesting to analyze NGO legitimacy work from the perspectives of his capital theory, to explore how local developing NGOs' and/or their stakeholders' need or desire for specific types of capital (economic, social, cultural) may influence NGO legitimacy work processes and their outcomes.

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Appendix: Overview over collected documents/data

Type of document /data	**Title of document**	**Received or collected**
Report	Sangathan's Annual Report 2017-2018	July 29th 2019
Report	Sangathan's Annual Report 2016-2018	Jan. 25th 2020
Report	Monthly report Dec. 2018 (Rehabilitation of Deprived Children through Education)	August 1st 2019
Report	Monthly Progress report, June 2019 (Girl Child Sponsorship Programme)	August 1st 2019
Report	Monthly Progress report, June 2019 (Residential Rehabilitation Programme for prevention of Child Labour)	August 1st 2019
Report	Monthly Progress report, June 2019	August 1st 2019
Report	Monthly Progress Report, June 2019 (Model School)	August 1st 2019
Report	Model school); Govt. recognized Un-aided	August 2nd 2019
Report	"A School Garden Project" First semi annual report 2018	August 3rd 2019
Project Proposal	Model School; Gov. recognized UN-aided	Nov. 11th 2019
Concept note to possible donors	Concept Note for livelihood project proposition for Vulnerable Communities	Nov. 11th 2019
Organization Profile	Organization profile of Sangathan	Nov.11th 2019
Report	Overview over possible projects (Model Villages)	Nov.11th 2019
Strategy Plan	Strategic Plan 2017-2022 Sangathan	Jan.25th. 2020

Strategy Plan	Strategic Plan 2012-2017 Sangathan	Jan.25th. 2020
Homepage (internet)	Official homepage of Sangathan	July 2019-May 2020
Social media (internet)	Facebook profile of Sangathan	July 2019-May 2020
Social media (internet)	Instagram profile of Sangathan	July 2019-May 2021
Social media (internet)	Youtube profile of Sangathan	July 2019-May 2021
Official homepage (internet)	Online donor platform Information about Sangathan retrieved at: XXXXX	July 29th-May 2021

Appendix: Preliminary Interview questions

Information about the informant:
- What is your age and educational background?
- What is your present job position at the NGO, what are your main responsibilities, and for how many years have you held this position?
- What is your involvement with and knowledge of the child education programs of your NGO?

General information about the school projects of NGO:
- Who are the target groups of your educational programs? (socioeconomic/social background, age, gender)

- What kind of school related projects does your NGO run, when did these projects approximately see daylight, and what is the main reason for running such projects?
(the main focus of my thesis is on school activities/projects, that are non-residential).

- How many children has the NGO reached with its projects, and how many does your NGO reach at present moment?

P.S. All the following questions relate to the non-residential school related activities of your NGO.

Questions about funding of the educational programs for the children:

- Who are the donors? (e.g. private donors, international NGOs, corporations, governments?)

- In what way do these donors/funders support the project? (monetary donations, physical donations of e.g. school materials/books, sponsorship etc.?)
- What kind of donors or help/support does your NGO prefer, and why?

- How does your NGO get in touch with the different donors, and which methods does your NGO utilize to convince potential donors to fund the school related projects?

- Do you experience that such methods are efficient enough, or is there need for/room for improvement? Please specify.

- What kind of demands do the different donors typically have in relations to the funding of your school related projects? Please give different examples.

- Do you/your NGO find that the funders'/donors' demands are reasonable enough, and do you experience that your NGO can live 100 per cent up to all of the donor demands? If yes/no, please specify.
- In what way does your NGO document/signal to your donors/funders, that your NGO/school project does live up to/have lived up to the criteria for funding?

- Do you have any foreign donors/funding when it comes to the school related projects? If yes/no please specify.

- If your NGO has foreign donors: How long has your NGO received foreign funding, and what type of donors are we talking about (private, foreign NGOs, govermental, corporations, foundations etc?). From which countries do these donors originate from, and how does your NGO typically get in touch with foreign donors? (via INGOs, internet etc.?).
- Are there any differences between the demands of local and foreign donors, and is it equally easy for your NGO to live up to the local and foreign donors' demands? Please specify.

Stakeholders in the education related programs for the children:

- What kind of stakeholders does your NGO consider itself answerable to and why?

- Are there any stakeholders, that you/your NGO consider the most important? If yes, why?

- According to the literature on NGO work, it can be a challenging task for NGOs to be 100 per cent answerable to all of their stakeholders due to various reasons, and when it comes to local NGOs in the countries in the South, who receive foreign contributions, many seem to prioritize donor's demands instead of local demands? What is your/your NGOs experience on this matter, when it comes to the school related activities in your NGO?

- Does your NGO feel (at times) that it is necessary to prioritize, when it comes to stakeholders, and is this on the expense of local stakeholders?

- According to literature, local stakeholders are essential for the survival of local NGO's. To what extent do you agree with this statement?

- Who are your typical local stakeholders?
- Does your NGO consider itself answerable to the target group and their possible families/local communities, when it comes to the school related activities? If yes/no, please specify.
- Does your NGO consider itself answerable to the government? Please specify.
    - To what extent is the local/national government involved (directly/indirectly) in your school programs. What role does the the local/national government play in your school related activities/projects? Please specify.
- According to the literature, the present government under Modi has due to various reasons tightened the rules & regulations when it comes to the NGO-sector. Is this something your NGO has noticed in your daily work (school related activities/projects)? If yes, in what way?
    - What specific demands/rules & regulations do the local/national governments set when it comes to NGO school related activities?
    - Do you/your NGO think that such rules & regulations are manageable?
    - Is it your experience that your NGO can fully live up to the demands/rules & regulations of local/national government? What does your NGO do to document, that you live up to the rules & regulations? Please specify and give examples.

Questions concerning NGO legitimacy and legitimacy work:
- What do you think makes an NGO in India legitimate/trustworthy in stakeholders'/audiences´ eyes?

- Is the concept "NGO legitimacy" something which your NGO is very aware of, generally and when it comes to your school related activities? If yes/no, please specify.
- How important is it for your NGO to stay legitimate amongst your stakeholders?
- Is your NGO well-known in the area where your work in the Indian society? If yes/no, why do you think it is so?
- Is it your experience that your NGO has strong legitimacy amongst your stakeholders/in the Indian society? If yes/no, please explain in more details.
- Does your NGO work very strategically with legitimacy work? If yes/no, please specify
    - What kind of methods/tools does your NGO utilize to stay legitimate among your different stakeholders and in the local societies where you operate (school related activities, non-residential)?
        - What rationale lies behind the methods your NGO might utilize to stay legitimate? Are such methods effective, or is there need to adjust them? Please specify and give examples.
        - To what extent is your NGO utilizing the traditional media in your legitimacy work?
        - To what extent is your NGO utilizing the internet/social media in your legitimacy work? Why does your NGO utilize social media, and what social media platforms does your NGO maybe utilize?
        - Is your NGO planning on utilizing other tools to stay legitimate towards
        - stakeholders/in society?

Challenges and coping mechanism of NGO:
- Why do you think that local NGOs in India may face legitimacy crisis?

- Has your NGO ever faced any legitimacy crisis related to your educational work for the children? If yes, please specify and give examples.

- If yes, why do you think that your NGO faced/faces legitimacy crisis/problems, and how did you handle such challenges?
- What does your NGO do, if a child, who has been offered help from your NGO, refuses to go to school or join your education center? (Does your NGO e.g. accept this and stay passive after that, or does your NGO utilize other methods?)
- Does your NGO feel accepted by parents/guardians of the children?
    - Has it been easy for your NGO to cooperate with the parents to send their children to school/your education centers?
        - How did/do the parents react to your work for their children?
        - What methods did/does your NGO utilize to convince the parents to cooperate with your NGO? Which methods have shown to be effective?
        - What does your NGO do, when the parents are hesitant or directly refuse to send their children to school/your educational centers? Do you stay passive or try other methods?
- How were/are the educational projects of your NGO received in the local communities/panchayats? Did your NGO face any problems in the beginning or later on, and what about presently? Please specify.
- How did/does your NGO handle possible legitimacy challenges/issues? And in those cases, where it is not possible to find solutions, what does your NGO do then do? (e.g. pull back from the area, negotiate, change strategies?)
- Has your NGO's educational project been subjected to pressures from any local political parties? If yes, in what way did/does your NGO respond to such pressures? And do you think that such situations may effect your NGO's legitimacy?

- According to the literature within the area, it can be difficult for NGOs to get a 100 percent match between mission and vision? Do you agree with such statement when it comes to the educational projects that your NGO runs? Please specify.

- Is your NGO's goal to have/achieve 100 percent match between visions and missions, and do you think this is possible? Please specify.
- Has your NGO faced any problems ensuring 100 percent match between vision and missions of your educational projects? If yes, please give specify and give examples.
- Do you think that a mismatch between mission and visions of an NGO affects an NGO's legitimacy and the trust of donors/stakeholders? What is your experiences? Please specify.
    - Have you ever experienced, that a donor has reduced or pulled back funds from a project due to legitimacy crisis or mismatch between vision and mission? If yes, please explain further and give examples.
    - In case your NGO has lost donor support due to legitimay crisis/mismatch between vision and mission, did your NGO do anything to regain the support of the same donors? If yes, what strategies did you utilize in this context?

- How would you define your NGOs problem solving strategies when it comes to handling legitimacy crisis and/or problems related to your educational projects for the children?

- Who in your NGO/educational project is responsible for handling issues and legitimacy crisis related to the educational project for the children (non-residential projects)?

    - Are such issues handled satisfactorily or is it room for improvement? Please specify
- To what extent are your NGO's decisions/actions/problem solving methods influenced by your surroundings/audiences/stakeholders?
    - Do you think that your NGO can fully operate and solve problems without external influences or external cooperation? Please specify.
    - What do you think personally is the best way to solve problems/legitimacy issues related to the school activities in your NGO? Is this method achievable in your NGO? Please specify.

Final/other questions:

- Is your NGO planning to expand its school related activities? If yes/no, please specify why.

- What motivates you/your NGO to continue with the educational project for the children?

- What do you think it will take for your NGO to stay legitimate in stakeholders eyes in the future? Do you think it will be more difficult in the future to maintain NGO legitimacy?

- Do you have anything to add?