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Communicating for organisational legitimacy: The case of the Potchefstroom Fire Protection Association



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ABSTRACT

The Potchefstroom Fire Protection Association (FPA) has an important role in preventing and managing veld fires in the Tlokwe Local Municipality's rural environment. The FPA works closely with several governmental stakeholders, but these stakeholders do not view the FPA as having high levels of organisational legitimacy. A lack of organisational legitimacy hinders the FPA in obtaining its organisational goals.

Theoretically, a NPO's role is dependent on its values, as embodied in its vision, mission and goals statement. Managing communication strategically to build strong relationships with key governmental stakeholders should assist NPOs to obtain and maintain organisational legitimacy. The purpose of the research was to determine by means of semi-structured interviews the perceptions of the FPA and its key governmental stakeholders on the role of the FPA as well as the quality of its stakeholder relationships, and the effect of these perceptions on the FPA's perceived organisational legitimacy.

The study confirmed the theoretical relationship between organisational legitimacy, strategic communication and relationship management and a clear, value-based role. It was recommended that NPOs should strive to establish two-way communication with key governmental stakeholders to enhance mutual understanding of as well as mutual control during veld fires.

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1. Introduction

The role of non-profit organisations (NPOs) in the disaster risk reduction and management field is becoming increasingly important, since government alone cannot address service delivery (Gastrow, 2010; Pillay, 2012; Rusca & Schwartz, 2012; Van de Walle & Johnston, 1996; Zhang, 2005). The South African Disaster Management Act (57/2002) acknowledges the capacity and supplementary role of NPOs for reducing disaster risks and building resilience in at-risk communities. Furthermore, the act specifies that NPOs should serve on disaster management structures such as the different Advisory Forums. White (1999) notes that collaboration with NPOs provides government an opportunity to gain some acknowledgement for services rendered, neutralise potential opposition, and achieve better and more cost effective implementation of government policy. On the other hand, NPOs also benefit from collaboration with government in that they can expand their work, gain influence and participate in policy formulation. However, the relationship between NPOs and government can be problematic, especially if NPOs provide services which government cannot (Feiock & Andrew, 2006; Gazley, 2008; Pick, Givauden, & Reich, 2008).

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Despite its increasing importance in service delivery, NPOs are constrained by a lack of knowledge concerning the value of strategic communication and relationship management due to failing to appoint qualified communication practitioners because of funding deficiencies (Bennett & Barkensjo, 2005; Brennan & Brady, 1999; Macmillan, Money, Money, & Downing, 2005; Naudé, 2001; Polonsky & Sargeant, 2007; Sargeant, 2001; Wiggill, 2009). However, it is crucial for NPOs to communicate its vision, mission and goals to key stakeholders, especially government to obtain organisational legitimacy to fulfil its goals. According to Atack (1999:855), organisational legitimacy refers to moral justifications for political and social action, while De Souza (2010) adds that it is a measure of the extent to which stakeholders find the organisation sensible and morally justifiable. These definitions imply that the levels of societal or stakeholder acceptance and recognition can indicate a NPO's legitimacy. Organisational legitimacy is dependent on two-way communication and strong, mutually beneficial relationships between a NPO and its stakeholders (Hudson, 2001).

This study focusses specifically on NPO–government relationships in disaster risk management and its impact on NPOs' organisational legitimacy. Therefore the research problem for this study is to determine the perceptions of a NPO working specifically in the disaster risk field, namely the Potchefstroom Fire Protection Association (from now on the FPA) and its key governmental stakeholders on the role of the FPA as well as the quality of its stakeholder relationships, and the effect of these perceptions on the FPA's perceived organisational legitimacy.

The theoretical background to the study, which includes legitimacy theory, communication and relationship management theory as well as roles theory, will be discussed in the next section. There after the case of the FPA will be argued as an illustration of the theoretical case in point.

2. Theoretical points of departure

2.1. Organisational legitimacy

Hudson (2001) defines legitimacy as an organisation seeking to justify its actions to stakeholders. Suchman (1995) defines "[L]egitimacy as a generalised perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions". This definition implies that organisational legitimacy is socially constructed and is not necessarily an objective opinion (Hudson, 2001). Organisations have different stakeholders with different and sometimes conflicting issues. This implies that an organisation's legitimacy with one stakeholder might be in conflict with its legitimacy with another stakeholder (Lister, 2003). Suchman (1995) asserts that organisational legitimacy leads to continual support from stakeholders because the organisation appears desirable, proper or appropriate because it continually acts out its organisational beliefs. Stakeholders are therefore able to understand an organisation from its predictable actions, and believe the organisation to be trustworthy. NPOs encounter problems regarding organisational legitimacy since many are viewed as being self-selected (these NPOs do not have members and/or advocate to promote the interests of non-members), unaccountable and not representing society (De Souza, 2010; Hudson, 2001; Rusca & Schwartz, 2012). Atack (1999) is of the opinion that especially service or development NPOs that help others, are sometimes viewed in the above light, while 'membership' organisations that help themselves are viewed as being more legitimate, depending on its accountability and effectiveness.

In South Africa it is widely recognised that local government fails to deliver on its constitutional responsibilities (Duvenage, 2012). One of the choices citizens have to address poor service delivery is system defection. According to Duvenage (2012), system defection indicates a form of "diy politics" or citizens taking action to provide services themselves. Many times citizens form membership NPOs to assist local government, or even to provide services themselves (Feiock & Andrew, 2006). However, the conflict arising from dissatisfaction with service delivery can impede both the NPO and government to attain organisational legitimacy, with government viewing the NPO as competition or trying to take over service delivery (Feiock & Andrew, 2006). In the South African context the situation is complicated furthermore because system defection is usually employed by white citizens, which government might view as racism (Duvenage, 2012).

Suchman (1995) identify three types of organisational legitimacy, namely *pragmatic*, *moral* and *cognitive* legitimacy. *Pragmatic* legitimacy refers to stakeholders supporting an organisation based on the expected value the organisation has for the specific group of stakeholders. Relating to pragmatic legitimacy, Atack (1999) recognised formal–procedural legitimacy that refers to authority and obtaining popular consent, as well as NPOs' methods of operation. Another form of pragmatic legitimacy is influence legitimacy where an organisation incorporates its stakeholders into the policy-making process (Suchman, 1995). A third form of pragmatic legitimacy is dispositional legitimacy that refers to stakeholders' feeling that the organisation is honest, trustworthy, have their best interest at heart and share their values (Suchman, 1995). Supporting the above theory, Atack (1999) developed two formal–procedural criteria to obtain and maintain NPOs' organisational legitimacy. The formal–procedural criteria are representativeness (including accountability) and distinctive values. *Representativeness* involves standards such as being transparent, accountable, participative and truly working in a partnership with others, such as government (Atack, 1999). Lister (2003) adds that representativeness indicates a NPO's right to represent as well as the consent of the represented. This implies that NPOs levels of representativeness can be raised by being accountable to and dealing transparently with all stakeholders and partners, such as government. Regarding *distinctive values*, Atack (1999) says that because NPOs need stakeholders' voluntary cooperation with or participation in their actions, they rely on stakeholders' value-based commitment to the organisation. Rusca and Schwartz (2012) refer to legitimacy dependent on values as normative legitimacy, and mention that the NPO's organisational, value-based identity is closely linked to normative or

moral legitimacy. According to [Ahern and Joyaux \(2008\)](#), NPOs should not deviate from its values or mission because many stakeholders align their values with that of the NPO and support the organisation because of shared values.

Moral legitimacy rests on stakeholders judging the organisation's actions as 'the right thing to do' to promote societal welfare ([Suchman, 1995](#)). In this case the organisation is evaluated on its outputs and consequences, its techniques and procedures, as well as on its leaders and representatives ([Suchman, 1995](#)). [Rusca and Schwartz \(2012\)](#) refer to output legitimacy. [Atack's \(1999\)](#) substantive–purposive legitimacy corresponds with [Suchman's \(1995\)](#) and [Rusca and Schwartz's \(2012\)](#) moral and output legitimacy in that it tends to be concerned with pursuing common good, such as development, or results. [Atack \(1999\)](#) developed two substantive–purposive criteria to obtain and maintain NPOs' organisational legitimacy, namely effectiveness (or performance) and empowerment. Strengthening NPOs' organisational legitimacy is their effectiveness in achieving goals and programme delivery ([Atack, 1999; Lister, 2003](#)). [Atack \(1999\)](#) furthermore mentions that a NPO's operational success, experience and competence add to its credibility when it participates in formulating government policies. It needs to be noted though that although NPOs operate well at the micro level, it cannot replace government at the macro level ([Atack, 1999](#)). This implies that NPOs need government to operate effectively, just as government needs NPOs to relieve its service delivery load. Empowerment refers to the process in which individuals are led to take control over their own lives ([Atack, 1999](#)). In this regard NPOs would gain organisational legitimacy if it assists its stakeholders to help themselves, to participate in collective decision-making and collective action ([Atack, 1999](#)). Empowerment is important in both self-selected NPOs and membership NPOs.

The third type of organisational legitimacy, namely *cognitive* legitimacy refers to stakeholders merely accepting an organisation as necessary or inevitable based on some cultural account ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy co-exist in reality ([Suchman, 1995](#)). [Lister \(2003\)](#) warns that one form of legitimacy is not more important than the other, but understanding which type of legitimacy is questioned by which stakeholder would provide a more nuanced understanding of a NPO's organisational legitimacy. One can argue that if a NPO's key governmental stakeholders perceive the organisation to have high levels of pragmatic and moral organisational legitimacy, the same stakeholders might accept the NPO and its service as necessary in the community, which refer to cognitive organisational legitimacy.

2.2. Strategic communication and relationship management

No organisation can address the needs and viewpoints of all its stakeholders and therefore some stakeholders may view an organisation as being more legitimate than others might. It is therefore necessary to determine the organisation's key stakeholders in order to establish a strong, mutually beneficial relationship with them ([Hudson, 2001; Steyn & Puth, 2000](#)). Even these key stakeholders will evaluate an organisation differently, depending on the type of relationship they have with the organisation ([Hudson, 2001](#)). Organisational legitimacy therefore depends on communicating the organisation's reason for being, or its values and role, to its key stakeholders to ensure strong organisation–stakeholder relationships. It is clear that communication and relationship building is necessary for gaining, maintaining and repairing organisational legitimacy.

[Suchman \(1995\)](#) emphasises two-way communication to identify stakeholders' views and needs as being important in gaining and maintaining organisational legitimacy proactively. The strategic communication management function of environmental scanning¹ enables the communication practitioner to gauge stakeholders' opinions and needs that might influence organisational strategy and/or advise management on how organisational strategy might impact key stakeholders ([Steyn & Puth, 2000](#)). Obtaining pragmatic legitimacy implies that the organisation meets the needs of its key stakeholders and provides them with decision-making access ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Environmental scanning, which in essence refers to two-way communication between the organisation and its stakeholders, enables the organisation to respond to its stakeholders needs and indirectly provide participation in decision-making processes. Moral legitimacy can be strengthened by communicating the organisation's role and actions as being morally acceptable and valuable. Maintaining organisational legitimacy is an on-going process in which research on stakeholders' needs and views as well as environmental change play an important role ([Suchman, 1995](#)). Repairing organisational legitimacy needs a parallel process of strategically managing the crisis ([Suchman, 1995](#)) and communicating with affected stakeholders.

In cases where totally different organisations such as NPOs and government work together to achieve a common goal, two-way communication is necessary to obtain mutual understanding of each other's goals and needs ([Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; Wiggill, 2009](#)). Applying two-way symmetrical communication practices enhances the development and maintenance of mutually beneficial, long-term relationships because it creates dialogue and mutual understanding between an organisation and its stakeholders ([Grunig et al., 1992, 2002](#)). [Feiock and Andrew \(2006\)](#) mention in this regard that while government responds to the needs of the majority, NPOs tend to the needs of particular groups with specific needs. Two-way communication is therefore of the utmost importance to firstly balance the needs of a minority to that of the majority, and secondly to obtain an understanding of the role of government and the NPO in a specific situation.

¹ Environmental scanning, monitoring or issues analysis entails monitoring the organisation's external environment to analyse and evaluate possible opportunities and threats out of interaction and relationships with other organisations, social groups or individuals. Organisational issues can arise from government or other regulatory organisation's actions, economic and social trends as well as from scientific and technological developments ([Gregory, 2010; Steyn & Puth, 2000](#)).

Two types of relationships can exist between NPOs and its key governmental stakeholders, namely exchange and communal relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). In an exchange relationship members benefit from one another in response to specific benefits received in the past or expected in the future (Hung, 2005, 2007). In other words, one party receives benefits (or goods) because they have provided benefits to the other party in the past, or will do so in future. A communal relationship is one in which benefits are provided in order to please the other party, without the benefactor expecting the beneficiary to return the favour (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Hung, 2007). Communal relationships are characterised by commitment amongst all involved in the relationship (Clark & Mills, 1979; Grunig, 2000; Paine, 2003). NPO–government relationships should be managed according to the demands unique to each type of relationship (Wiggill, Naudé, & Fourie, 2009), and relationships can interchange depending on organisational goals and the specific situation (Hung, 2001, 2007; Wiggill, 2009).

Different relationship outcomes indicate the quality of the relationship (Hon & Grunig, 1999; Huang, 2001; Hung, 2001). *Trust* refers to one party's level of confidence in and willingness to expose itself to the other party. Trust has three underlying dimensions, namely integrity, dependability and competence. *Mutual control* refers to the extent to which parties agree on who has rightful power to influence the other. *Commitment* entails all parties involved feeling that the relationship is worth spending time and energy on. *Relationship satisfaction* refers to the extent to which one party is positive towards the other because positive expectations regarding the relationship are reinforced and the benefits of the relationship outweigh the costs.

There are several *relationship-cultivation strategies* that can be applied to build strong relationships between a NPO and government, such as providing access to information and disclosing information irrespective of possible power imbalances; networking with the same groups as its stakeholders; cooperating and sharing tasks; as well as delivering on promises (Grunig & Huang, 2000; Hung, 2001, 2007; Plowman, 1998, 2005).

2.3. NPOs' roles

From the above discussion on organisational legitimacy, it is clear that all organisations' communication strategy should be aligned to its vision, mission and goals in order to contribute most to the success and effectiveness of the organisation (Grunig & Grunig, 2000; Grunig & Repper, 1992; Steyn, 2000, 2002; Webster, 1990). Webster (1990) posits that an organisation's reason for being is reflected in its vision, mission and goals, and should also be reflected in its communication strategy. NPOs should keep this in mind in order to obtain organisational legitimacy and social trust to operate in a specific environment (Suchman, 1995), especially with regard to government relations.

A NPO's vision, mission and goals stem from how it perceives its social role. Role theory developed from a sociological context where it is argued that both organisational and individual roles consist of expectations about the quantity and type of behaviour of a person/organisation in a specific role (Ilgen & Hollenbeck, 1991; Turner, 2001). Roles depict repeated, standardised behavioural patterns and serve as a guide to the behaviour and outcomes that are expected of individuals or organisations (Dozier, 1992). This implies that an organisation's stakeholders expect certain behaviour from the organisation, based on its mission, vision, goals as well as previous behaviour.

NPOs have mainly three types of roles regarding their relationship with government: *complementing/supplementing* government where it participates with government in providing services government would otherwise be unable to provide; *opposing* government (as activists or adversaries) by forming pressure groups in an effort to engage with government to change its policies; and *reforming* government where NPOs represent interest groups that are working at grassroots level, as well as negotiating with government to improve government policies (Feiock & Andrew, 2006; Liebenberg, 1997; Young, 2006). Feiock and Andrew (2006) add that NPOs' *complementing* role is characterised by cooperation and coordination in planning and providing services. Although Liebenberg (1997) is of the opinion that NPOs usually have one of the above relationships with government, Wiggill (2009) and Young (2006) believe that NPOs can engage in a combination of the above relationships with government. Two-way communication between the NPO and government is very important since even if they have shared goals, their interests are not the same.

In Fig. 1 the connection between legitimacy theory, strategic communication and relationship management theory and role theory will be depicted visually.

In summary it can be argued that a NPO needs to build strong relationships, in which the NPO's values and subsequent role form the foundation, with key governmental stakeholders. If the NPO strives towards building strong stakeholder relationships in which trust, commitment, mutual control and relationship satisfaction are evident, it should be able to obtain and maintain the organisational legitimacy it needs to operate. In the following case study on the FPA the difficulties concerning organisational legitimacy that arise when a NPO does not communicate its values and role clearly to stakeholders, as well as act within the boundaries of its role, will be discussed.

3. Potchefstroom Fire Protection Association (FPA)

3.1. FPA's background and structure

The FPA originated from a civil defence organisation that functioned during the 1980s. In 1989 the organisation became known as the Disaster Management Potchefstroom Rural and it operated directly under Potchefstroom Disaster Management. In 2005 the FPA as organisation was registered, and the local municipality managed it. Agreeing with legislation (National

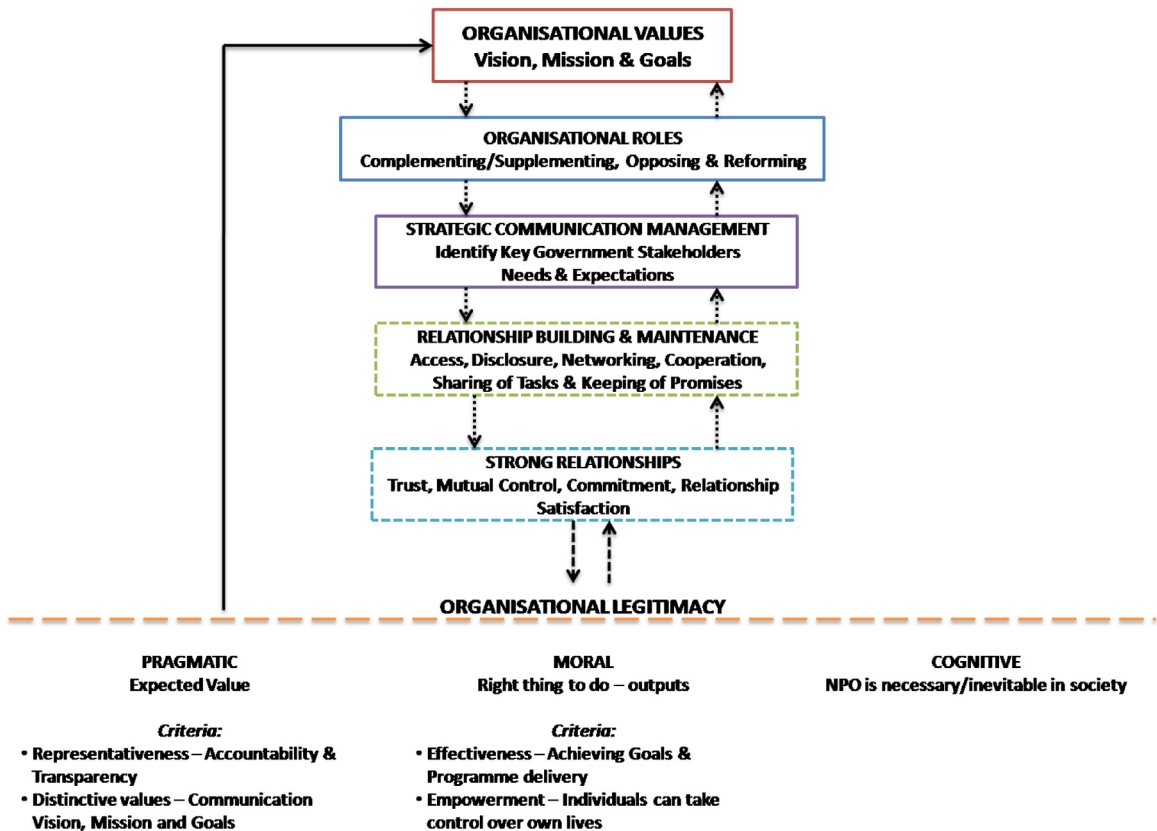


Fig. 1. NPOs' organisational legitimacy.

Veld and Forest Fire Act, 101/1998), the FPA became an independent organisation in 2008, with the municipality becoming a member. From 2011 the FPA started to collect membership fees, and registered as a NPO in July 2012. However, the FPA still forms part of the Disaster Management Potchefstroom Volunteers (DMPV²), and the DMPV is functioning as part of the Tlokwe³ Local Municipality's Disaster Management Centre. The DMPV provides its members with education, information, advice and training regarding disaster risk management, which includes fighting veld fires, floods and enhancing safety on farms. The FPA and the DMPV are managed by the same management team.

The FPA therefore functions as an autonomous NPO that forms part of the DMPV. In its capacity as part of the DMPV, the FPA functions under the authority of the Tlokwe Local Municipality's Disaster Management Centre. The Tlokwe Local Municipality's Disaster Management Centre forms part of the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre.

According to Roux (personal communication, 2 October 2012), all paid-up members of the FPA also belong to the DMPV (when a person applies for FPA membership, he/she also receive a membership application form for the DMPV). Although persons who are members of only the DMPV do not pay any membership fees, the FPA's finances are indirectly also used for rural disaster management, since FPA members are also members of the DMPV. Finances are mostly used for purchasing communication media, such as two-way radios.

Roux (personal communication, 2 October 2012) explained that rural land owners who are members of only the DMPV receive a list with emergency contact numbers, as well as the contact details of FPA and DMPV members. The FPA operates an effective sms-system that is used to keep members of both the FPA and the DMPV updated on issues regarding veld fires, possible disasters and safety. The FPA manages approximately 600 base stations (farms/smallholdings with radio communication) and 1500 mobile units. In other words, if there is a veld fire risk, DMPV members will also receive all

² The DMPV plays a supporting role in disaster risk management, as outlined by the *Disaster Management Act (57/2002)*. The Act makes provision for the formal managerial structures and duties of Disaster Management Centres at National, provincial, and municipal levels. According to *Act 57/2002*, a local municipality may establish a unit of volunteers that is trained to assist emergency services during disasters. Volunteers may participate in training, such as exercises and simulations related to disaster management organised by national, district or municipal disaster management centres. The Act outlines the management structure, training and duties of volunteers.

³ After 1994 the ANC changed the names of many cities, towns and streets. In 2006 it was proposed that the name of the city Potchefstroom change to Tlokwe. After disapproval from the community, it was decided to keep the name of Potchefstroom, but to change the local municipality's name to the Tlokwe Local Municipality (De Beer, 2007). The Tlokwe Local Municipality forms part of the greater Kenneth Kaunda District in the North-West Province.

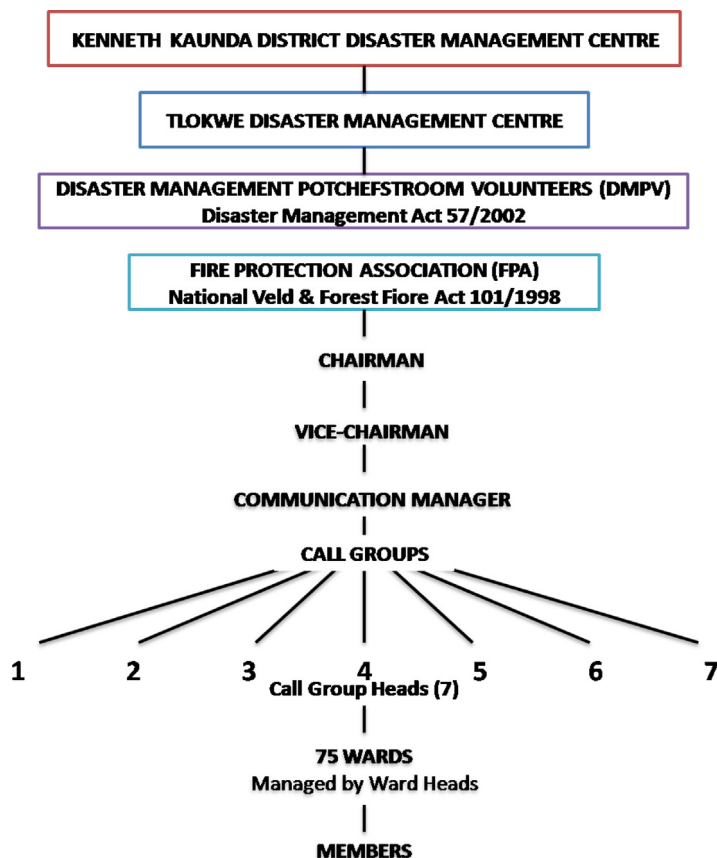


Fig. 2. FPA structure.

necessary information. The FPA states that the above procedure makes it clear that the FPA does not exclude rural land owners from information and assistance if they cannot afford to pay FPA membership fees.

The FPA's members are organised into 7 Call Groups, which is divided into 75 wards. The call groups and wards assist the FPA in locating and reacting to veld fires quickly. The Call Group Heads manage the Ward Heads, who in turn manage the members in the ward. The FPA has approximately 1300 members, which includes families and farm workers. The structure of the FPA is illustrated in Fig. 2.

The FPA operates according to the [National Veld and Forest Fire Act \(101/1998\)](#) to prevent and manage veld fires, which is a regular occurrence during winter in the North West Province (Anon, 2010; Cilliers, 2011; Davies, 2011). According to the [National Veld and Forest Fire Act \(101/1998, chap. 2\)](#), the FPA has several duties, including:

- developing and applying a veld fire management strategy for its area;
- providing the minimum standards to be maintained by members in relation to all aspects of veld fire prevention and readiness for fire fighting;
- providing controlled burning to conserve ecosystems and reduce the fire danger;
- providing in the strategy for agreed mechanisms for the co-ordination of actions with adjoining fire protection associations;
- making rules which bind its members;
- identifying the ecological conditions that affect the fire danger;
- regularly communicating the fire danger rating to its members;
- organising and training its members in fire fighting, management and prevention;
- informing its members of equipment and technology available for preventing and fighting veld fires;
- providing management services, training and support for communities in their efforts to manage and control veld fires;
- supplying the Minister at least once every 12 months with statistics about veld fires in its area; and
- furnishing any information requested by the Minister in order to prepare or maintain the fire danger rating system.

From the above description of the tasks of the FPA, it is clear that the organisation has a complementary, supportive role towards government in that it assists the Tlokwe Fire Brigade in preventing and managing veld fires. The FPA also supports the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre in preventing and managing veld fire disasters, as has happened in August 2011.

4. Research method

A qualitative research approach was followed to obtain an understanding (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Lindloff, 1995) of the way in which the FPA perceives and communicates its role to its key governmental stakeholders, as well as how the FPA's key governmental stakeholders view of the FPA's role affects its organisational legitimacy. Semi-structured interviews (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001; Rubin & Rubin, 1995) were conducted with the:

- FPA's Chairman,
 - Vice-Chairman,
 - Communication Manager, and
 - Call Group Heads;
- Three senior managers from the Tlokwe Fire Brigade;
- Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre's Crisis Control Officer;
- The acting Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Manager; and
- Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre: Coordinator.

All the interviewees were selected because of the contribution they could make to the study, and therefore formed part of a convenience sample (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). The farmers in the rural areas of the Tlokwe local municipality are the FPA's key stakeholders, but the focus of this study is on NPO–government relations and organisational legitimacy. The Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre, Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre and Tlokwe Fire Brigade are the FPA's key governmental stakeholders, and should therefore form part of the sample. The aim of the interviews was to disclose the researcher's insight into the research phenomenon even though the qualitative interpretations resulted from an intensive analysis of a small sample (Lindlof, 1995:57). All the participants agreed to the recording of the interviews, in order to ease the analysis of data.

The main purpose of the interviews was to obtain an understanding of the *perceptions* of both the FPA and its key governmental stakeholders on the role of the FPA and the quality of its stakeholder relationships, and the *effect* of these perceptions on the FPA's perceived organisational legitimacy. Therefore, the interviews aimed to:

- determine how the FPA perceives and communicates its role;
- determine how the FPA perceives the quality of its relationships with key governmental stakeholders;
- determine how the FPA's key governmental stakeholders perceive the role of the FPA as well as the quality of its relationship with the FPA; and
- determine the effect of the different perceptions of the FPA's role and stakeholder relationships on its perceived organisational legitimacy.

An interpretative approach to data analysis was followed to analyse the data. Theory on organisational legitimacy, strategic communication and relationship management as well as role theory were used to guide the analysis of the data obtained during the interviews.

5. Results and discussion

The report on the results of the study will be divided into four sections. In the first section the perception of the FPA on its role as well as the quality of its relationship with key governmental stakeholders will be discussed. Thereafter the perceptions of the FPA's key governmental stakeholders, namely the Tlokwe Fire Brigade, the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre and the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre on will be described, as well as how these perceptions relates to the FPA's perceived organisational legitimacy.

5.1. The FPA's perception of its role as well as the quality of its relationships with key governmental stakeholders

According to the FPA,⁴ the organisation is representing all rural land owners, but they do not view themselves as the official spokesman of all farmers. The chairman emphasised that rural land owners of all races can be part of the Potchefstroom FPA, and that the organisation is definitely not only for white farmers, which is a common misconception. The interviewees said that the FPA has a vision and mission statement, and their goals are clearly defined by the [National Veld and Forest Fire Act \(101/1998\)](#). Nonetheless, they did feel that they could communicate their duties and goals better since it seems as if not all stakeholders understand the role of the FPA. The interviewees did mention that the FPA's Communication Manager handles press releases as well as the functioning of the communication system between farmers, indicating a technical view on communication management.

⁴ Whenever the FPA as an *entity* is named, it includes the views of the FPA's Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Communication Manager and 4 Call Group Heads, unless stated differently.

Over and above its duties as stipulated by the [National Veld and Forest Fire Act \(101/1998\)](#), the FPA views community service as a moral duty. Whenever a member (also members of the DMPV) has a problem, the FPA tries to coordinate action with the necessary service providers or emergency services. An example would be when a farm labourer's wife is having a baby and experience difficulty in getting an ambulance, the farmer might contact the FPA, who will call the ambulance and/or a doctor. A recent example occurred when an aeroplane crashed at an air show in neighbouring Klerksdorp. One of the FPA's members is a qualified pilot, and he was sent to the air show to offer possible assistance.

All the interviewees are of the opinion that they have a relatively strong relationship with the Tlokwe Fire Brigade. Although the Tlokwe Fire Brigade does not like to be criticised, the FPA feels that incompetence should be pointed out since lives depend on them. According to the FPA chairman, there are not problems regarding control of a fire situation, because there is a specific procedure in place. The first farmer on the scene commands the situation until the Ward Head arrives. When the Tlokwe Fire Brigade arrives, the most senior fire fighter will take command of the scene, in *collaboration* with the most senior person from the FPA. If this procedure is followed, there should be no difficulties regarding mutual control during veld fires. However, some fire fighters, “especially the younger ones”, are not competent enough to command a situation. Furthermore, fire fighters do not always keep in mind the stress and high emotional impact of seeing one's farm burning down, and usually interpret a “difficult” farmer as being racist. One of the Call Group Heads mentioned that most of the farmers realise that “everybody must work together during veld fires” and that they are not racist towards the Tlokwe Fire Brigade.

The FPA is of the opinion that its relationship with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre is less than satisfactory. The FPA doubts the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre's competence and commitment to managing veld fire disasters. In this case the FPA does not view the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre to have pragmatic or moral organisational legitimacy. Nevertheless, the FPA emphasised that it would like to have a close working relationship with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre, but according to an interviewee the FPA has a “one-sided love affair” with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre. During disasters the FPA continually provides information to the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre, but they do not receive any information in return. When the FPA does not provide information to the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre, they are criticised heavily. It is evident that withholding information creates conflict, and it confirms [Hon and Grunig's \(1999\)](#) notion that openness and disclosing information builds strong relationships. Furthermore, according to an interviewee, personnel from the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre have openly told the FPA that they do not trust the FPA because it seems as if the FPA wants to control the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre. The FPA denies it, adding that the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre wants to hide their incompetence with such allegations.

The FPA views its relationship with the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Centre as positive. One of the interviewees pointed out that problems do occur when the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre does not inform the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Centre of on-going disasters, as has happened during the veld fires of 23 August 2011. This implies that the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Centre is unable to provide the necessary assistance during and after a disaster. Such incompetence is heavily criticised by the FPA, which weakens the FPA's relationship with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre even more.

The interviewees believe that the FPA has a complementary and reforming role. The FPA complements the functions of all its key governmental stakeholders, while its reforming role realises in critique against incompetence and non-commitment, as well as influencing policies regarding veld fire prevention and management. All the interviewees agree that many times the FPA “has to take matters into [their] own hands” because of key governmental stakeholders' incompetence and lack of commitment to veld fire prevention and management. This indicates a strong case of system defection (see Section 2.1). It is therefore clear that the FPA views the organisation as being legitimate.

In summary, the FPA believes that the organisation has a clear vision, mission and goal statement, but that it could be communicated better to all stakeholders. The FPA perceives its role as being more than just preventing and managing veld fires, but also as a moral duty to the rural community in the Tlokwe Local Municipality. This NPO perceives its relationship with the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Centre as relatively strong, while its relationship with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre is weak. According to the interviewees, the latter relationship is characterised by mistrust and problems regarding mutual control. Despite relational difficulties with some key governmental stakeholders, the FPA does not question its organisational legitimacy.

5.2. *The Tlokwe Fire Brigade's perception of the FPA's role as well as the quality of its relationship with the FPA*

All the interviewees are of the opinion that the help of the FPA and its members is utterly important in fighting veld fires. One of the interviewees estimated that the farmers extinguished about 40% of the veld fires during the 23 August 2011 veld fire disaster. The same interviewee said, “You know in Potch[efstroom], it's so good that people are having passion. When they see the smoke rising they tend to run and assist. Especially farmers. . .” The interviewees agreed that it is especially the FPA's communication system that is useful to mobilise farmers in veld fire situations, emergencies and disasters. All interviewees therefore acknowledged the complementary role of the FPA.

Regarding communication management, one of the interviewees feels very strong about the FPA communicating its role more effectively to non-members because veld fires mostly start on non-members' land. He knows that many non-members know that neighbouring farmers, who are FPA members, would assist them in case of a veld fire in fear of it spreading to their farms. Many non-members' property is insured, but they are not aware that if a veld fire destroys their property and they

do not have sufficient fire fighting equipment, the insurance would not pay out. Being a member of the FPA is an advantage in this regard. Furthermore, farmers can sue the land owner on whose land a veld fire started, for damages. If the sued land owner is not a member of the FPA, all damages will have to be paid by law. Regarding organisational legitimacy, this interviewee believes that the FPA is not effective in communicating its vision, mission and goals to all rural land owners, as well as empowering all rural land owners to prevent and manage veld fires. Therefore this specific interviewee believes the FPA's level of pragmatic and moral organisational legitimacy to be low.

The interviewees agreed that the Tlokwe Fire Brigade has a relatively good relationship with the FPA, but one interviewee said that he “sometimes get the idea that the FPA tries to take over the Fire Brigade.” He noted that some members of the FPA refuse to follow the set communication structure and make decisions that should be made by the Tlokwe Fire Chief or the Tlokwe Disaster Manager. This results in relationships being damaged. In such situations both the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre appears to be unwilling, indecisive and incompetent, but they have to follow the correct communication procedures. It also happens that the Tlokwe Fire Chief and/or the Tlokwe Disaster Manager's evaluation of the situation differ from that of the FPA, but the FPA do not always respect the decisions taken. It is clear that Tlokwe Fire Brigade perceive its relationship with the FPA as being problematic regarding mutual control as well as lacking mutual understanding. This perception differs from that of the FPA, according to which there are few problems regarding mutual control with the Tlokwe Fire Brigade during veld fires.

One of the interviewees said that many times the Tlokwe Fire Brigade is criticised by the FPA because it might appear as if they take too long to respond to veld fires. However, the interviewee emphasised that the Tlokwe Fire Brigade is not supposed to be the first responder to veld fires. A veld fire is firstly the responsibility of the land owner, and if he/she cannot control the veld fire, the help of the FPA must be called in. The Tlokwe Fire Brigade can only be dispatched when the FPA and its members cannot extinguish the veld fire. The interviewee emphasised that the FPA's most important role is to empower rural land owners to prevent and fight veld fires, with assistance from local authorities. The interviewee said furthermore that the FPA has an important role to play in changing or improving current fire fighting policies. This interviewee clearly believes that the FPA does not understand and/or enact its role, as outlined by the [National Veld and Forest Fire Act \(101/1998\)](#), and as a result demand more services from the Tlokwe Fire Brigade than they are entitled to. According to him, this misunderstanding adds to conflict and perceiving the FPA to have low levels of moral organisational legitimacy.

Relating to the above perception, one of the interviewees criticised the FPA for not always keeping the definition of a disaster⁵ in mind when it responds to situations or emergencies. The interviewee said that it seems as if “the FPA wants to apply disaster management laws to the FPA.” He is adamant that the FPA cannot “arrive at any scene . . . they must know their place.” The interviewee added that it is difficult to command a scene where the FPA “just arrives” and that the FPA's presence “adds to the chaos and conflict.” Another interviewee said in this regard (in a separate interview) that the Tlokwe Fire Brigade is very thankful for the FPA's assistance, but that accountability is an important factor to be taken into account. If the FPA has not been *formally* dispatched to assist emergency services, and something happens to a FPA member, the member cannot hold the local municipality accountable for injuries incurred.

One of the interviewees is of the opinion that the FPA is not representative of the whole rural community. Although the Barolong⁶ tribe are members of the FPA, they are not absorbed into the FPA's formal structures. According to the interviewee, the Barolongs do not attend the FPA's meetings, during which only Afrikaans is spoken. The interviewee stated that the FPA is viewed by many as “a far right group that wants to hold on to power”, but insisted that this is not necessarily the official view of the Tlokwe Fire Brigade. This perception confirms the FPA defending themselves as to be an inclusive NPO (see previous section, first paragraph). In this case the interviewee doubts the FPA's pragmatic as well as moral legitimacy.

It can be concluded that although the interviewees of the Tlokwe Fire Brigade view the FPA as indispensable in veld fire prevention and management, they question the FPA's level of representativeness, its effectiveness in communicating its vision, mission and goals to all stakeholders, including non-members, as well as empowering all rural land owners to prevent and manage veld fires. This implies that the Tlokwe Fire Brigade does not perceive the FPA as having high levels of pragmatic and moral organisational legitimacy. The FPA's lack of understanding of the Tlokwe Fire Brigade's formal communication procedures as well as difficulties in sharing control during veld fires weakens the relationship between the two parties. These relational constraints add to the Tlokwe Fire Brigade perceiving the FPA as not having high levels of organisational legitimacy.

5.3. The Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre's perception of the FPA's role as well as the quality of its relationship with the FPA

The interviewee was positive about the FPA's contribution to the prevention and management of veld fires. He pointed out the effective communication structure between the FPA and its members, as well as with DMPV members. Although the

⁵ A *situation* occurs when a single emergency service can manage the situation, without dispatching assistance from other emergency services. When other emergency services' assistance is needed to manage a situation, it becomes an *emergency*. When all the local emergency services are working at an emergency, and more assistance is needed, it becomes a *disaster*.

⁶ On 28 July 2007, the Barolong Boo Bodiboa Ba Matlwang tribe based at Machavie, 20 km from Potchefstroom received land for the establishment of the Highveld National Park after a land restitution claim (Anon, 2007). As landowners, the tribe should by law be a member of the FPA.

interviewee did not want to discuss the issue, he noted that there are “trouble between [Disaster Manager] and the FPA”, especially because the FPA “overstep their boundaries, but it is not only the FPA’s fault.” This interviewee also said that the FPA cannot react to all situations and emergencies, but only to those relating to veld fires. He added that the FPA, acting as the DMPV, only has a role to play during disasters. He emphasised that the weak relationship between the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre and the FPA hampers both organisations delivering quality emergency services.

Although the interviewee recognises that the weak relationship between the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre and the FPA can be attributed to both parties, this situation damages both organisations’ legitimacy. By implication the FPA should strive to improve its relationship with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre, specifically by keeping its role in mind. The Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre is the FPA’s link to the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre, and poor relationships could negatively influence the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre perception of the FPA’s pragmatic and moral legitimacy. This negative perception might in turn reduce the FPA’s ability to contribute to formulating governmental policies.

5.4. The Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre’s perception of the FPA’s role as well as the quality of its relationship with the FPA

Both interviewees are convinced that the FPA is effective in fighting veld fires. One of the interviewees noted that “. . .remember that the FPA people are doing quite an excellent job” and pointed out that he believes the Potchefstroom FPA to be the best in the country. The interviewees are adamant that no disaster management centre can “do its job without the help of the FPA and the farmers.” One interviewee said that the FPA has an important coordinating role, because “farmers are a valuable resource for the municipality to fight veld fires.” It is clear from these opinions that the interviewees have a high regard for the FPA’s complementary role. Furthermore, the interviewees’ perceptions indicate that the FPA has high levels of moral legitimacy, especially regarding its effectiveness.

Despite the above praise, one of the interviewees feels that the FPA must allow the emergency services to be the first responders on a scene because they are trained professionals. The FPA members do not always have the necessary training to manage a specific incident, and their lives could therefore be in danger. The interviewee is of the opinion that the FPA’s reaction to all situations and emergencies contributes greatly to its weak relationship with the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre.

The same interviewee noted that the perceived incompetence of fire fighters and perceived racism from farmers add to the conflict and mistrust between the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and the FPA. The interviewee is not convinced that farmers are always racist, because they realise that they have to work with the fire fighters to save their livestock and property. He is of the opinion that the Tlokwe Fire Brigade should make a discerned effort to change the negative perceptions about its service, which in turn would strengthen its relationship with the FPA. Improved service delivery and relationships would enhance the Tlokwe Fire Brigade’s organisational legitimacy in the eyes of the FPA.

One of the interviewees also questioned the FPA’s representativeness. Sometimes it seems to him as if the FPA is expressing the views of a few of their board members, and not necessarily that of the majority of land owners. In this instance the interviewee is of the opinion that the FPA should improve two-way communication with its members, as well as with authorities. According to the interviewee it is especially important to improve trust between FPA members and the Tlokwe Fire Brigade, because none of the organisations can fight veld fires without each other’s help. The second interviewee added that the FPA should strive to enlist as many rural land owners as FPA members as possible. He said that miscommunication, or land owners not receiving information create misconceptions about the role of the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre during and after disasters.

In summary, the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre has a very high regard for the FPA’s effectiveness. However, the interviewees also mentioned the FPA’s interference during situations and emergencies not related to veld fires, as a factor contributing to conflict with governmental stakeholders. The interviewees emphasised that the FPA should communicate its vision, mission, goals as well as role to all its members as well as non-members. These interviewees also view the FPA’s communication regarding the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre’s role in disaster relief as well as members’ role in governmental structures as lacking.

In the following section recommendations on how the FPA can communicate its role more effectively and improve relationships with its key governmental stakeholders to improve its levels of organisational legitimacy, will be discussed.

6. Recommendations

6.1. The FPA’s role and communication and relationship management

It is clear from the interviews that all the FPA’s key governmental stakeholders have a high regard for the work this NPO does. However, the FPA’s confusion regarding the boundaries of its complementary role in veld fire risk prevention and management, as well as in disaster management as the DMPV has a negative effect in obtaining organisational legitimacy from its key governmental stakeholders. The fact that the FPA and the DMPV have the same members and are managed by the same management team seems to be problematic. The FPA views its main role as preventing and managing veld fires. However, as the DMPV, the same management team and members are eager to provide assistance where and whenever

a situation occurs. All the FPA's key governmental stakeholders voiced their concern on the FPA's, acting as the DMPV, involvement in situations and emergencies. This indicates that the FPA should separate its role clearly from that of the DMPV, and should only provide disaster management assistance as needed and requested by the Tlokwe Disaster Manager.

It is evident that the FPA's key governmental stakeholders view the DMPV as the FPA, which indicates that they also do not differentiate between the two organisations. This confusion leads to governmental stakeholders being negative towards the FPA as an organisation, while they actually have issues with the DMPV. Confusion regarding the FPA and DMPV's roles is the most important contributing factor to the weak relationship between the FPA and especially the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre. The weak relationship with key governmental stakeholders has a negative effect on the FPA obtaining organisational legitimacy, which in turn leads to further conflict. This implies that the FPA should clearly communicate its vision, mission and goals, as well as how it complements government in veld fire risk prevention and management to both its members and its key governmental stakeholders.

Adding to the above confusion regarding the FPA's role is the rural community's view of the FPA/DMPV being an entity providing general assistance (Wiggill, 2013). The FPA is proud of being able to assist the community, but they have to take care to distinguish between neighbourly assistance and the role of the FPA and/or the DMPV. This is very important since the FPA's feeling of being morally responsible for the community's well-being is currently impeding its relationship with key governmental stakeholders when they want to provide assistance where the official emergency services are already managing the situation or emergency.

6.2. The FPA and organisational legitimacy

Although it is clear from the above section that the FPA's key governmental stakeholders believe that the FPA experience confusion regarding their role and boundaries, the FPA has formulated their vision, mission and goals regarding veld fire prevention and management according to their *distinctive values* (Atack, 1999). Clearly differentiating between the roles of the FPA and the DMPV would assist the FPA to strengthen its levels of *pragmatic* legitimacy in that its key governmental stakeholders would know what value the FPA has for them during veld fires (Atack, 1999; Suchman, 1995).

It was mentioned by two governmental stakeholders that the FPA is not representative of the whole Tlokwe Local Municipality's rural population, which impedes the FPA's levels of pragmatic legitimacy. The FPA might be considered to be more representative of the Tlokwe Local Municipality's rural population if they strive to engage their members more, perhaps by having meetings in both Afrikaans and English. Some of the farmers are fluent in Tswana (the native language of the North-West Province), and can act as translators if necessary. By providing all members access to decision-making processes, the FPA will enhance their relationship with members, as well as gaining more pragmatic legitimacy. This in turn might lead to authorities recognising the FPA as being representative of the Tlokwe Local Municipality's rural population.

The issue of the FPA perceiving some fire fighters and especially the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre as being incompetent was mentioned several times during the interviews. It is acceptable that the FPA points out instances of perceived incompetence, but it must be done in a respectful and constructive way. The FPA could have follow-up meetings with their key governmental stakeholders to discuss any problems that occurred during a veld fire. The FPA should try to obtain an understanding of the actions taken, and address the perceived wrong behaviour. In this way, the FPA might not be viewed as aggressive "know-all who try to take over." The FPA would gain moral legitimacy as they are empowering their governmental stakeholders to obtain their goals more effectively. However, all parties must be willing to cooperate to improve service delivery, and not be over-sensitive to criticism. By being constructive, all parties involved could learn from the experience.

The FPA's operational success, experience and competence add to the NPO experiencing high levels of moral legitimacy in this regard, which makes the FPA suitable to assist their governmental stakeholders to formulate policies regarding veld fire risk prevention and management. The FPA should keep its *reforming* role in mind, and attempt to negotiate with its key governmental stakeholders to especially improve policies concerning communication structures and obtaining faster clearance for decisions during disasters. Engaging with governmental stakeholders in two-way communication regarding legislation and/or policies could enhance mutual understanding and result in stronger relationships, which in turn would strengthen the FPA's pragmatic and moral organisational legitimacy.

The FPA's relationship with the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and the Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre are established, despite a lack of trust on both sides. All parties involved do not perceive the other to have high levels of organisational legitimacy. Nonetheless, the FPA is *complementing* government in its task, and should keep in mind that mutual control will always be difficult to manage. There are procedures in place, and the FPA should abide by the rules and decisions made. The FPA should engage in two-way communication with the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and Disaster Management Centre when there are different opinions at hand. That said, both the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and Disaster Management Centre's personnel should demonstrate their competence and commitment clearly in order to gain the respect and trust of the FPA. Keeping promises, in this case doing one's job, is necessary to achieve dependability and competence, which are key dimensions of trust. In doing this, both the FPA and their governmental stakeholders would gain mutual organisational legitimacy.

Concerning the negative perceptions about the FPA acting as the DMPV at inappropriate times, it might serve the Tlokwe Fire Brigade and Disaster Management Centre well to *use* the FPA members' willingness to serve their community rather than just to criticise them. Training and two-way communication are very important to establish a trusting relationship that is necessary for such an arrangement to work effectively. In this case, it would be mutually beneficial regarding obtaining pragmatic and moral legitimacy from the community since service delivery would improve.

One of the most difficult relationship cultivation strategies to apply is to be unconditionally constructive in a relationship. However, the FPA, Tlokwe Fire Brigade, Tlokwe Disaster Management Centre and the Kenneth Kaunda District Disaster Management Centre should keep in mind that they are not in a relationship for their own benefit, but to serve the Tlokwe Local Municipality's community. If all the above organisations want to attain *moral* and *cognitive* legitimacy, they should be willing to sometimes give up some of their aims, even when others do not respond to their good intentions. They should keep in mind that they all have both communal and exchange relationships with their community, and therefore the wellbeing of the community is more important than their differences.

7. Conclusion

The study at hand confirmed the theoretical relationship between a NPO's role, engaging in two-way communication with key governmental stakeholders to build strong relationships, and its perceived organisational legitimacy. The study showed that NPOs' communication must be confirmed by its actions, otherwise stakeholder relationships, especially with government could suffer. The case study on the FPA also confirmed Suchman's (1995) notion that pragmatic, moral and cognitive legitimacy co-exist, which means that NPOs should strive to obtain and maintain all three types of legitimacy in order to experience overall organisational legitimacy from its key governmental stakeholders. NPOs should draw up their vision and mission carefully and deduct their goals and subsequent role from the statement.

Another important finding of the study is that NPOs should act within the boundaries of their role, especially regarding collaboration with government. It is therefore very important for NPOs collaborating with governmental stakeholders to continually engage with government to gauge their needs and views, and to include this strategic information into decision-making processes. If NPOs communicate and act their expected role, relationships with key governmental stakeholders would be strong, long lasting and mutually beneficial. In such a case, NPOs should have high levels of organisational legitimacy, especially cognitive legitimacy, which means that the organisation is accepted as part of the community, providing expected services effectively.

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