

# **'Everything is Politics': understanding the political dimensions of NGO legitimacy in conflict-affected regions**

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The paper seeks to understand how national NGOs in conflict-affected regions generate and maintain legitimacy by examining the experience of NGO sectors in three such regions (Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Palestinian Territories (PTs)). This analysis highlights several important ways in which the dynamics of NGO legitimation and de-legitimation in these regions diverge from those described in most existing accounts of NGO legitimacy, and argues that these accounts are unhelpful for understanding how legitimacy is generated, lost and maintained by national NGOs working in conflict-affected or transitional contexts. The paper provides a corrective to existing accounts of NGO legitimacy, which have depicted legitimacy as arising in a stable fashion in relation to generalisable technical qualities such as downward accountability, representativeness, performance and transparency.

The paper argues that NGO legitimacy in conflict-affected contexts is closely bound up with broader political and societal legitimacy struggles concerning political authority and state sovereignty. It also finds that NGO legitimacy in these environments is liable to fluctuate in relation to changes in the political climate and is likely to be instrumentalised by political actors. Based on an examination of these characteristics, the paper advocates an approach to understanding NGO legitimacy that pays greater attention to the contextual and political dimensions of processes of legitimation and de-legitimation.